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WARS**
E P I S O D E I
THE PHANTOM MENACE™

TERRY BROOKS

BASED ON THE SCREENPLAY AND STORY
BY GEORGE LUCAS



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*To Lisa, Jill, Amanda, & Alex,
the kids who grew up with the story
&
to Hunter,
the first of the next generation*

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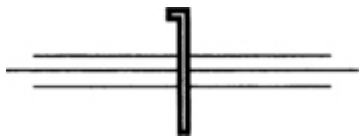
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**A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR
AWAY....**



Tatooine.

The suns burned down out of a cloudless blue sky, washing the vast desert wastes of the planet in brilliant white light. The resultant glare rose off the flat, sandy surface in a wet shimmer of blistering heat to fill the gaps between the massive cliff faces and solitary outcroppings of the mountains that were the planet's sole distinguishing feature. Sharply etched, the monoliths stood like sentinels keeping watch in a watery haze.

When the Podracers streaked past, engines roaring with ferocious hunger and relentless drive, the heat and the light seemed to shatter and the mountains themselves to tremble.

Anakin Skywalker leaned into the curve of the raceway that took him past the stone arch marking the entry into Beggar's Canyon on the first lap of the run, easing the thruster bars forward, giving the engines a little more juice. The wedge-shaped rockets exploded with power, the right a tad harder than the left, banking the Pod in which Anakin sat sharply left to clear the turn. Swiftly, he adjusted the steering to straighten the racer, boosted power further, and shot through the arch. Loose sand whiplashed in the wake of his passing, filling the air with a gritty sheen, whirling and dancing through the heat. He ripped into the canyon, fingers playing across the controls, hands steady on the steering.

It was all so quick, so instantaneous. One mistake, one misjudgment, and he would be out of the race and lucky if he weren't dead. That was the thrill of it. All that power, all that speed, just at his fingertips, and no margin for error. Two huge turbines dragged a fragile Pod over sandy flats, around jagged-edged mountains, down shadowed draws, and over heart-wrenching drops in a series of twisting, winding curves and jumps at the greatest speed a driver could manage. Control cables ran from the Pod to the engines, and energy binders locked the engines to each other. If any part of the three struck something solid, the whole of the assembly would collapse in a splintering of metal and a fiery wash of rocket fuel. If any part broke free, it was all over.

A grin split Anakin's young face as he injected a bit more power into the thrusters.

Ahead, the canyon narrowed and the shadows deepened. Anakin bore down on the slit of brightness that opened back onto the flats, keeping low to the ground where passage was widest. If he stayed high, he risked brushing the cliff faces on either side. That had happened to Regga in a race last month, and they were still looking for the pieces.

It would not happen to him.

He shoved the thruster bars forward and exploded through the gap onto the flats, engines screaming.

Sitting in the Pod with his hands on the controls, Anakin could feel the vibration of the engines travel up the control cables and fill him with their music. Wrapped in his rough-made jumpsuit, his racing helmet, his goggles, and his gloves, he was wedged so closely in his seat that he could feel the rush of the wind across the Pod's skin beneath him. When he raced like this, he was never simply the driver of a Podracer, never just an additional part. Rather, he was at one with the whole, and engines, Pod, and he were bound together in a way he could not entirely explain. Each shimmy, each small throb, each tug and twist of strut and tie were apparent to him, and he could sense at any given moment exactly what was happening throughout the length and breadth of his racer. It spoke to him in its own language, a mix of sounds and feelings, and though it did not use words, he could understand everything it said.

Sometimes, he thought dreamily, he could sense what it would say before it even spoke.

A flash of gleaming orange metal shot past him on his right, and he watched the distinctive split-X of Sebulba's engines flare out before him, taking away the lead he had seized through an unusually quick start. His brow wrinkled in disgust at himself for his momentary lapse of concentration and his dislike of the other racer. All gangly and crook-legged, Sebulba was as twisted inside as out, a dangerous adversary who won often and took delight in doing so at the expense of others. The Dug had caused more than a dozen crashes of other Podracers in the past year alone, and his eyes glinted with wicked pleasure when he recounted the tales to others on the dusty streets of Mos Espa. Anakin knew Sebulba well—and knew better than to take chances with him.

He rode the thruster bars forward, fed fresh power to the engines, and rocketed ahead.

It didn't help, he supposed as he watched the distance between them narrow, that he was human or, much worse, that he was the only human ever to drive in the Podraces. The ultimate test of skill

and daring on Tatooine and the favorite spectator sport of the citizens of Mos Espa, it was supposed to be beyond the skill and capability of any human. Multiple arms and multihinged joints, stalk eyes, heads that swiveled 180 degrees, and bodies that twisted as if boneless gave advantages to other creatures that humans could not begin to overcome. The most famous racers, the best of a rare breed, were strangely shaped, complexly formed beings with a penchant for taking risks that bordered on insanity.

But Anakin Skywalker, while nothing like these, was so intuitive in his understanding of the skills required by his sport and so comfortable with its demands that his lack of these other attributes seemed to matter not at all. It was a source of some mystery to everyone, and a source of disgust and growing irritation to Sebulba in particular.

Last month, in another race, the wily Dug had tried to run Anakin into a cliff face. He had failed only because Anakin sensed him coming up from behind and underneath, an illegal razor saw extended to sever Anakin's right Steelton control cable, and Anakin lifted away to safety before the saw could do its damage. His escape cost him the race, but allowed him to keep his life. It was a trade he was still angry at having been forced to make.

The racers whipped through columns of ancient statuary and across the floor of the arena erected on the edge of Mos Espa. They swept under the winner's arch, past row upon row of seats crammed with spectators cheering them on, past pit droids, repair stations, and the boxes where the Hutts watched in isolated splendor above the commoners. From an overlook in a tower centered on the arch, the two-headed Troig who served as announcer would be shouting out their names and positions to the crowd. Anakin allowed himself a momentary glimpse of blurred figures that were left behind so fast they might have been nothing more than a mirage. His mother, Shmi, would be among them, worrying as she always did. She hated watching him drive in the Podraces, but she couldn't help herself. She never said so, but he thought she believed that simply by being there she could keep him from coming to harm. It had worked so far. He had crashed twice and failed to finish even once, but after more than half a dozen races he was unharmed. And he liked having her there. It gave him a strange sort of confidence in himself he didn't like to think about too closely.

Besides, what choice did they have in the matter? He raced because he was good at it, Watto knew he was good at it, and whatever Watto wanted of him he would do. That was the price you paid when you were a slave, and Anakin Skywalker had been a slave all his life.

Arch Canyon rose broad and deep before him, an expanse of rock

leading into Jag Crag Gorge, a twisting channel the racers were required to navigate on their way to the high flats beyond. Sebulba was just ahead, rocketing low and tight across the ground, trying to put some distance between Anakin and himself. Behind Anakin, close now, were three other racers spread out against the horizon. A quick glance revealed Mawhonic, Gasgano, and Rimkar trailing in his strange bubble pod. All three were gaining. Anakin started to engage his thrusters, then drew back. They were too close to the gorge. Too much power there, and he would be in trouble. Response time in the channel was compacted down to almost nothing. It was better to wait.

Mawhonic and Gasgano seemed to agree, settling their Pods into place behind his as they approached the split in the rock. But Rimkar was not content to wait and roared past Anakin split seconds before they entered the cleft and disappeared into darkness.

Anakin leveled out his Pod, lifting slightly from the rock-strewn floor of the channel, letting his memory and his instincts take him down the winding cut. When he raced, everything around him slowed down rather than sped up. It was different than you'd expect. Rock and sand and shadows flew past in a wild mix of patterns and shapes, and still he could see so clearly. All the details seemed to jump out at him, as if illuminated by exactly what should make them so difficult to distinguish. He could almost close his eyes and drive, he thought. He was that much in tune with everything around him, that much aware of where he was.

He eased swiftly down the channel, catching glimpses of Rimkar's engine exhausts as they flashed crimson in the shadows. Far, far overhead, the sky was a brilliant blue streak down the center of the mountain, sending a frail streamer of light into the gap that lost brilliance with every meter it dropped so that by the time it reached Anakin and his fellow racers, it barely cut the dark. Yet Anakin was at peace, lost deep within himself as he drove his Pod, bonded with his engines, given over to the throb and hum of his racer and the soft, velvet dark that folded about.

When they emerged into the light once more, Anakin jammed the thruster bars forward and streaked after Sebulba. Mawhonic and Gasgano were right behind. Ahead, Rimkar had caught Sebulba and was trying to edge past. The lanky Dug lifted his split-X engines slightly to scrape against Rimkar's Pod. But Rimkar's rounded shell eased smoothly away, unaffected. Side by side the racers tore across the high flats, headed for Metta Drop. Anakin closed on them, drawing away from Mawhonic and Gasgano. People said what they wanted about Watto—and there was plenty to say that wasn't good—but he had an eye for Podracers. The big engines jumped obediently as Anakin fed fuel into the thrusters, and in seconds he was drawing

alongside Sebulba's split-X.

They were even when they reached Metta Drop and rocketed over and tumbled straight down.

The trick with drops, as every racer knew, was to gather enough speed going down to gain time over your opponents, but not so much speed that the racer couldn't pull out of the drop and level out again before it nosedived into the rocks below. So when Sebulba pulled out early, Anakin was momentarily surprised. Then he felt the backwash of the split-X engines hammer into his Pod. The treacherous Dug had only looked as if he would pull out and instead had lifted away and then deliberately fishtailed atop both Anakin and Rimkar, using his exhaust to slam them against the cliff face.

Rimkar, caught completely by surprise, jammed his thruster bars forward in an automatic response that took him right into the mountain. Metal fragments of Pod and engines careened away from the rock wall in a fiery shower, leaving a long black scar along the ravaged surface.

Anakin might have gone the same way but for his instincts. Almost before he knew what he was doing, at the same instant he felt the backwash of Sebulba's engines slam into him, he lifted out of his own descent and away from the mountain, almost colliding with a surprised Sebulba, who veered off wildly to save himself. Anakin's sudden wrenching of his Pod's steering took him spinning away into the midday, off course and out of control. He pulled back on the steering, eased off on the thrusters, cut the fuel supply to the big engines, and watched the ground rise up to meet him in a rush of sand and reflected light.

He struck the ground in a bone-wrenching skid that severed both control cables, the big engines flying off in two directions while the Pod careened first left, then right, and then began to roll. Anakin could only brace himself inside, spinning and twisting in a roil of sand and heat, praying that he didn't wind up against an outcropping of rock. Metal shrieked in protest and dust filled the Pod's interior. Somewhere off to his right, an engine exploded in a ground-shaking roar. Anakin's arms were stretched out to either side, keeping him squarely placed through the pummeling the Pod experienced as it continued to roll and then roll some more.

Finally, it stopped, tilted wildly to one side. Anakin waited a moment, then loosened his restraining belt and crawled out. The heat of the desert rose to meet him, and the blinding sunlight bore down through his goggles. Overhead, the last of the Podracers streaked away into the blue horizon, engines whining and booming. Silence followed, deep and profound.

Anakin glanced left and right at what remained of his engines,

taking in the damage, assessing the work they would need to operate again. He looked finally at his Pod and grimaced. Watto would not be happy.

But then Watto seldom was.

Anakin Skywalker sat down with his back against the ruined Pod, gaining what small relief he could from its shadow in the glare of Tatooine's twin suns. A landspeeder would be along in a few minutes to pick him up. Watto would be there to chew him out. His mother would be there to give him a hug and take him home. He wasn't satisfied with how things had turned out, but he wasn't discouraged either. He could have won the race if Sebulba had played fair. He could have won easily.

He sighed and tipped back his helmet.

One day soon he would win a lot of races. Maybe even next year, when he reached the age of ten.



Do you have any idea what this is going to cost me, boy? Do you have any idea at all? *Oba chee ka!*"

Watto hovered before him, launching into Huttese without even thinking about it, choosing a language that offered a vast array of insulting adjectives he could draw upon. Anakin stood stoically in place, his young face expressionless, his eyes fastened on the pudgy blue Toydarian hovering before him. Watto's wings were a blur of motion, beating with such ferocity it seemed as if they must surely fly off his lumpy little body. Anakin stifled an urge to laugh as he imagined this happening. It would not do to laugh just now.

When Watto paused for breath, Anakin said quietly, "It wasn't my fault. Sebulba flashed me with his port vents and nearly smashed me into Metta Drop. He cheated."

Watto's mouth worked as if chewing something, his snout wrinkling over his protruding teeth. "Of course he cheated, boy! He always cheats! That's how he wins! Maybe you should cheat just a little now and then! Maybe then you wouldn't crash your Pod time after time and cost me so much money!"

They were standing in Watto's shop in the merchants' district of Mos Espa, a dingy mud-and-sand hut fronting an enclosure packed with rocket and engine parts salvaged from scrapped and junked wrecks. It was cool and shadowy inside, the planet's heat shut out by the thick walls, but even here dust hung in the air in hazy streamers caught by the ambient light cast by glow lamps. The race had long since ended and the planet's twin suns had dropped toward the horizon with evening's slow approach. The wrecked Podracer and its engines had been transported by mechanic droids from the flats back to the shop. Anakin had been transported back as well, though with somewhat less enthusiasm.

"*Rassa dwee cuppa, peedunkel!*" Watto screamed, starting in again on Anakin in a fresh burst of Huttese.

The pudgy body lurched forward a few centimeters with each epithet, causing Anakin to step back in spite of his resolve. Watto's bony arms and legs gestured with the movements of his head and

body, giving him a comical appearance. He was angry, but Anakin had seen him angry before and knew what to expect. He did not cringe or bow his head in submission; he stood his ground and took his scolding unflinchingly. He was a slave and Watto was his master. Scoldings were part of life. Besides, Watto would wind down shortly now, his anger released in a manner that would satisfy his need to cast blame in a direction other than his own, and things would go back to normal.

All three fingers of Watto's right hand pointed at the boy. "I shouldn't let you drive for me anymore! That's what I should do! I should find another driver!"

"I think that is a very good idea," Shmi agreed.

Anakin's mother had been standing to one side, not saying anything during the whole of Watto's diatribe, but now she was quick to take advantage of a suggestion she would have made herself, if asked.

Watto wheeled on her, spinning violently, wings whirring, and flew to confront her. But her calm, steady gaze brought him up short, pinning him in the air midway between mother and son.

"It's too dangerous in any case," she continued reasonably. "He's only a boy."

Watto was immediately defensive. "He's my boy, my property, and he'll do what I want him to do!"

"Exactly." Shmi's dark eyes stared out of her worn, lined face with resolution. "Which is why he won't race anymore if you don't want him to. Isn't that what you just said?"

Watto seemed confused by this. He worked his mouth and trunklike nose in a rooting manner, but no words would come out. Anakin watched his mother appreciatively. Her lank, dark hair was beginning to gray, and her once graceful movements had slowed. But he thought she was beautiful and brave. He thought she was perfect.

Watto advanced on her another few centimeters, then stopped once more. Shmi held herself erect in the same way that Anakin did, refusing to concede anything to her condition. Watto regarded her sourly for a moment more, then spun around and flew at the boy.

"You will fix everything you ruined, boy!" he snapped, shaking his finger at Anakin. "You will repair the engines and the Pod and make them as good as new! Better than new, in fact! And you'll start right now! Right this instant. Get out there and get to work!"

He spun back toward Shmi defiantly. "Still plenty of daylight for a boy to work! Time is money!" He gestured at first mother and then son. "Get on with it, the both of you! Back to work, back to work!"

Shmi gave Anakin a warm smile. "Go on, Anakin," she said softly. "Dinner will be waiting."

She turned and went out the door. Watto, after giving Anakin a final

withering glance, followed after her. Anakin stood in the shadowed room for a moment, staring at nothing. He was thinking that he shouldn't have lost the race. Next time—and there would be a next time, if he knew Watto—he wouldn't.

Sighing in frustration, he turned and went out the back of the shop into the yard. He was a small boy, even at nine years of age, rather compactly built, with a mop of sandy hair, blue eyes, a pug nose, and an inquisitive stare. He was quick and strong for his age, and he was gifted in ways that constantly surprised those around him. He was already an accomplished driver in the Podraces, something no human of any age had ever been before. He was gifted with building skills that allowed him to put together almost anything. He was useful to Watto in both areas, and Watto was not one to waste a slave's talent.

But what no one knew about him except his mother was the way he sensed things. Frequently he sensed them before anyone even knew they would happen. It was like a stirring in the air, a whisper of warning or suggestion that no one else could feel. It had served him well in the Podraces, but it was also there at other times. He had an affinity for recognizing how things were or how they ought to be. He was only nine years old and he could already see the world in ways most adults never would.

For all the good it was doing him just at the moment.

He kicked at the sand in the yard as he crossed to the engines and Pod the droids had dumped there earlier. Already his mind was working on what it would take to make them operable again. The right engine was almost untouched, if he ignored the scrapes and tears in the metal skin. The left was a mess, though. And the Pod was battered and bent, the control panel a shambles.

"Fidget," he muttered softly. "Just fidget!"

Mechanic droids came out at his beckoning and set to work removing the damaged parts of the racer. He was only minutes into sorting through the scrap when he realized there were parts he needed that Watto did not have on hand, including thermal varistats and thruster relays. He would have to trade for them from one of the other shops before he could start on a reassembly. Watto would not like that. He hated asking for parts from other shops, insisting that anything worth having he already had, unless it came from off world. The fact that he was trading for what he needed didn't seem to take the edge off his rancor at having to deal with the locals. He'd rather win what he needed in a Podrace. Or simply steal it.

Anakin looked skyward, where the last of the day's light was beginning to fade. The first stars were coming out, small pinpricks against the deepening black of the night sky. Worlds he had never seen and could only dream about waited out there, and one day he

would visit them. He would not be here forever. Not him.

“Psst! Anakin!”

A voice whispered cautiously to him from the deep shadows at the back of the yard, and a pair of small forms slipped through the narrow gap at the fence corner where the wire had failed. It was Kitster, his best friend, creeping into view with Wald, another friend, following close behind. Kitster was small and dark, his hair cut in a close bowl about his head, his clothing loose and nondescript, designed to preserve moisture and deflect heat and sand. Wald, trailing uncertainly, was a Rodian, an off-worlder who had come to Tatooine only recently. He was several years younger than his friends, but bold enough that they let him hang around with them most of the time.

“Hey, Annie, what’re you doing?” Kitster asked, glancing around doubtfully, keeping a wary eye out for Watto.

Anakin shrugged. “Watto says I have to fix the Pod up again, make it like new.”

“Yeah, but not today,” Kitster advised solemnly. “Today’s almost over. C’mon. Tomorrow’s soon enough for that. Let’s go get a ruby bliel.”

It was their favorite drink. Anakin felt his mouth water. “I can’t. I have to stay and work on this until ...”

He stopped. Until dark, he was going to say, but it was nearly dark already, so ...

“What’ll we buy them with?” he asked doubtfully.

Kitster motioned toward Wald. “He’s got five druggats he says he found somewhere or other.” He gave Wald a sharp look. “He says.”

“Got ’em right here, I do.” Wald’s strange, scaly head nodded assurance, his protruding eyes blinking hard. He pulled on one green ear. “Don’t you believe me?” Wald said in Huttese.

“Yeah, yeah, we believe you.” Kitster winked at Anakin. “C’mon, let’s go before old flapping wings gets back.”

They went out through the gap in the fence and down the road behind, turned left, and hurried through the crowded plaza toward the food stores just ahead. The streets were still crowded, but the traffic was all headed homeward or to the Hutt pleasure dens. The boys zipped smoothly through knots of people and carts, past speeders hovering just off the surface, down walks beneath awnings in the process of being drawn up, and along stacks of goods being set inside under lock and key.

In moments, they had reached the shop that sold ruby bliels and had worked their way up to the counter.

Wald was as good as his word, and he produced the requisite druggats in exchange for three drinks and handed one to each of his friends. They took them outside, sipping at the gooey mixture through

straws, and made their way slowly back down the street, chatting among themselves about racers and speeders and mainline ships, about battle cruisers and starfighters and the pilots who captained them. They would all be pilots one day, they promised each other, a vow they sealed with spit and hand slaps.

They were right in the middle of a heated discussion over the merits of starfighters, when a voice close to them said, "Give me the choice, I'd take a Z-95 Headhunter every time."

The boys turned as one. An old spacer stood leaning on a speeder hitch, watching them. They knew what he was right away from his clothing, weapons, and the small, worn fighter corps insignia he wore stitched to his tunic. It was a Republic insignia. You didn't see many of those on Tatooine.

"Saw you race today," the old spacer said to Anakin. He was tall and lean and corded, his face weatherworn and sun-browned, his eyes an odd color of gray, his hair cut short so that it bristled from his scalp, his smile ironic and warm. "What's your name?"

"Anakin Skywalker," Anakin told him uncertainly. "These are my friends, Kitster and Wald."

The old spacer nodded wordlessly at the other two, keeping his eyes fixed on Anakin. "You fly like your name, Anakin. You walk the sky like you own it. You show promise." He straightened and shifted his weight with practiced ease, glancing from one boy to the next. "You want to fly the big ships someday?"

All three boys nodded as one. The old spacer smiled. "There's nothing like it. Nothing. Flew all the big boys, once upon a time, when I was younger. Flew everything there was to fly, in and out of the corps. You recognize the insignia, boys?"

Again, they nodded, interested now, caught up in the wonder of coming face-to-face with a real pilot—not just of Podracers, but of fighters and cruisers and mainline ships.

"It was a long time ago," the spacer said, his voice suddenly distant. "I left the corps six years back. Too old. Time passes you by, leaves you to find something else to do with what's left of your life." He pursed his lips. "How're those ruby bliels? Still good? Haven't had one in years. Maybe now's a good time. You boys care to join me? Care to drink a ruby bliel with an old pilot of the Republic?"

He didn't have to ask twice. He took them back down the street to the shop they had just left and purchased a second drink for each of them and one for himself. They went back outside to a quiet spot off the plaza and stood sipping at the bliels and staring up at the sky. The light was gone, and stars were sprinkled all over the darkened firmament, a wash of silver specks nestled against the black.

"Flew all my life," the old spacer advised solemnly, eyes fixed on

the sky. "Flew everywhere I could manage, and you know what? I couldn't get to a hundredth of what's out there. Couldn't get to a millionth. But it was fun trying. A whole lot of fun."

His gaze shifted to the boys again. "Flew a cruiser filled with Republic soldiers into Makem Te during its rebellion. That was a scary business. Flew Jedi Knights once upon a time, too."

"Jedi!" Kitster exhaled sharply. "Wow!"

"Really? You really flew Jedi?" Anakin pressed, eyes wide.

The spacer laughed at their wonder. "Cross my heart and call me bantha fodder if I'm lying. It was a long time ago, but I flew four of them to a place I'm not supposed to talk about even now. Told you. I've been everywhere a man can get to in one lifetime. Everywhere."

"I want to fly ships to those worlds one day," Anakin said softly.

Wald snorted doubtfully. "You're a slave, Annie. You can't go anywhere."

The old pilot looked down at Anakin. The boy couldn't look at him. "Well," he said softly, "in this life you're often born one thing and die another. You don't have to accept that what you're given when you come in is all you'll have when you leave."

He laughed suddenly. "Reminds me of something. I flew the Kessel Run once, long ago. Not many have done that and lived to tell about it. Lots told me I couldn't do it, told me not to bother trying, to give it up and go on to something else. But I wanted that experience, so I just went ahead and found a way to prove them wrong."

He looked down at Anakin. "Could be that's what you'll have to do, young Skywalker. I've seen how you handle a Podracer. You got the eyes for it, the feel. You're better than I was at twice your age." He nodded solemnly. "You want to fly the big ships, I think maybe you will."

He stared at the boy, and Anakin stared back. The old spacer smiled and nodded slowly. "Yep, Anakin Skywalker, I do think maybe one day you will."

He arrived home late for dinner and received his second scolding of the day. He might have tried making something up about having to stay late for Watto, but Anakin Skywalker didn't lie to his mother. Not about anything, not ever. He told her the truth, about stealing away with Kitster and Wald, about drinking ruby bliels, and about sharing stories with the old spacer. Shmi wasn't impressed. She didn't like her son spending time with people she didn't know, even though she understood how boys were and how capable Anakin was of looking after himself.

"If you feel the need to avoid the work you've been given by Watto, come see me about the work that needs doing here at home," she

advised him sternly.

Anakin didn't argue with her, smart enough by now to realize that arguing in these situations seldom got him anywhere. He sat quietly, eating with his head down, nodding when nodding was called for, thinking that his mother loved him and was worried for him and that made her anger and frustration with him all right.

Afterward, they sat outside on stools in front of their home in the cool night air and looked up at the stars. Anakin liked sitting outside at night before bed. It wasn't so close and confined as it was inside. He could breathe out here. His home was small and shabby and packed tight against dozens of others, its thick walls comprised of a mixture of mud and sand. It was typical of quarters provided for slaves in this part of Mos Espa, a hut with a central room and one or two bumpouts for sleeping. But his mother kept it neat and clean, and Anakin had his own room, which was rather larger than most and where he kept his stuff. A large workbench and tools took up most of the available space. Right now he was engaged in building a protocol droid to help his mom. He was adding the needed parts a piece at a time, scavenging them from wherever he could, slowly restoring the whole. Already it could talk and move about and do a few things. He would have it up and running soon.

"Are you tired, Annie?" his mother asked after a long silence.

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Still thinking about the race?"

"Yes."

And he was, but mostly he was thinking about the old spacer and his tales of flying mainline ships to distant worlds, of going into battle for the Republic, and of rubbing shoulders with Jedi Knights.

"I don't want you racing Pods anymore, Annie," his mother said softly. "I don't want you to ask Watto to let you. Promise me you won't."

He nodded reluctantly. "I promise." He thought about it a moment. "But what if Watto tells me I have to, Mom? What am I supposed to do then? I have to do what he tells me. So if he asks, I have to race."

She reached over and put a hand on his arm, patting him gently. "I think maybe after today he won't ask again. He'll find someone else."

Anakin didn't say so, but he knew his mother was wrong. There wasn't anyone better than he was at Podracing. Not even Sebulba, if he couldn't cheat. Besides, Watto would never pay to have someone else drive when he could have Anakin do it for free. Watto would stay mad another day or two and then begin to think about winning again. Anakin would be back in the Podraces before the month was out.

He gazed skyward, his mother's hand resting lightly on his arm, and thought about what it would be like to be out there, flying battle

cruisers and fighters, traveling to far worlds and strange places. He didn't care what Wald said, he wouldn't be a slave all his life. Just as he wouldn't always be a boy. He would find a way to leave Tatooine. He would find a way to take his mother with him. His dreams whirled through his head as he watched the stars, a kaleidoscope of bright images. He imagined how it would be. He saw it clearly in his mind, and it made him smile.

One day, he thought, seeing the old spacer's face in the darkness before him, the wry smile and strange gray eyes, I'll do everything you've done. Everything.

He took a deep breath and held it.

I'll even fly with Jedi Knights.

Slowly he exhaled, the promise sealed.



The small Republic space cruiser, its red color the symbol of ambassadorial neutrality, knifed through starry blackness toward the emerald bright planet of Naboo and the cluster of Trade Federation fleet ships that encircled it. The ships were huge, blocky fortresses, tubular in shape, split at one end and encircling an orb that sheltered the bridge, communications center, and hyperdrive. Armaments bristled from every port and bay, and Trade Federation fighters circled the big beasts like gnats. The more traditionally shaped Republic cruiser, with its tri-engines, flat body, and squared-off cockpit, looked insignificant in the shadow of the Trade Federation battleships, but it continued toward them, undeterred.

The cruiser's captain and copilot sat side by side at the forward console, hands moving swiftly over the controls as they steered closer to the ship with the Trade Federation viceroy insignia emblazoned on its bridge. There was a nervous energy to their movements that was unmistakable. From time to time, they would glance uneasily at each other—and over their shoulders at the figure who stood in the shadows behind.

On the viewscreen in front of them, captured from his position on the bridge of the battleship toward which they were headed, was Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray, his reddish orange eyes staring out at them expectantly. The Neimoidian wore his perpetually sour expression, mouth downturned, bony brow emphasizing his discontent. His green-gray skin reflected the ambient lighting of the ship, all pale and cold in contrast to his dark robes, collar, and tricornered headdress.

“Captain.”

The cruiser captain turned slightly in her seat to acknowledge the figure concealed in the shadows behind her. “Yes, sir?”

“Tell them we wish to board at once.”

The voice was deep and smooth, but the measure of resolution it contained was unmistakable.

“Yes, sir,” the captain said, giving the copilot a covert glance, which the copilot returned. The captain faced Nute Gunray on the screen.

“With all due respect, Viceroy, the ambassadors for the supreme chancellor have requested that they be allowed to board immediately.”

The Neimoidian nodded quickly. “Yes, yes, Captain, of course. We would be happy to receive the ambassadors at their convenience. Happy to, Captain.”

The screen went dark. The captain hesitated, glancing back at the figure behind her. “Sir?”

“Proceed, Captain,” Qui-Gon Jinn said.

The Jedi Master watched silently as the Trade Federation battleship loomed before them, filling the viewport with its gleaming bulk. Qui-Gon was a tall, powerfully built man with prominent, leonine features. His beard and mustache were close-cropped and his hair was worn long and tied back. Tunic, pants, and hooded robe were typically loose-fitting and comfortable, a sash binding them at his waist where his lightsaber hung just out of view, but within easy reach.

Qui-Gon’s sharp blue eyes fixed on the battleship as if to see what waited within. The Republic’s taxation of the trade routes between the star systems had been in dispute since its inception, but until now all the Trade Federation had done in response was to complain. The blockade of Naboo was the first act of outright defiance, and while the Federation was a powerful body, equipped with its own battle fleet and army of droids, its action here was atypical. The Neimoidians were entrepreneurs, not fighters. They lacked the backbone necessary to undertake a challenge to the Republic. Somehow they had found that backbone. It bothered Qui-Gon that he could not explain how.

He shifted his weight as the cruiser moved slowly into the gap in the Trade Federation flagship’s outer wheel toward the hangar bay. Tractor beams took hold, guiding the cruiser inside where magnetic clamps locked the ship in place. The blockade had been in effect now for almost a month. The Republic Senate continued to debate the action, searching for an amicable way to resolve the dispute. But no progress had been made, and at last the supreme chancellor had secretly notified the Jedi Council that he had sent two Jedi directly to the ostensible initiators of the blockade, the Neimoidians, in an effort to resolve the matter more directly. It was a bold move. In theory, the Jedi Knights served the supreme chancellor, responding on his direction to life-threatening situations. But any interference in the internal politics of the Senate’s member bodies, particularly where an armed conflict between worlds was involved, required Senate approval. The supreme chancellor was skirting the edges of his authority in this case. At best, this was a covert action and would spark heated debate in the Senate at a later date.

The Jedi Master sighed. While none of this was his concern, he

could not ignore the implications of what it meant if he failed. The Jedi Knights were peacemakers; that was the nature of their order and the dictate of their creed. For thousands of years they had served the Republic, a constant source of stability and order in a changing universe. Founded as a theological and philosophical study group so far back that its origins were the stuff of myth, the Jedi had only gradually become aware of the presence of the Force. Years had been spent in its study, in contemplation of its meaning, in mastery of its power. Slowly the order had evolved, abandoning its practice of and belief in a life of isolated meditation in favor of a more outward-looking commitment to social responsibility. Understanding the Force sufficiently to master its power required more than private study. It required service to the greater community and implementation of a system of laws that would guarantee equal justice for all. That battle was not yet won. It probably never would be. But the Jedi Knights would not see it lost for lack of their trying.

In the time of Qui-Gon Jinn, ten thousand Jedi Knights in service to the Republic carried on the struggle each day of their lives in a hundred thousand different worlds spread across a galaxy so vast it could barely be comprehended.

He turned slightly as his companion in this present enterprise arrived on the bridge and came up to stand beside him. "Are we to board?" Obi-Wan Kenobi asked softly.

Qui-Gon nodded. "The viceroy will meet with us."

He glanced momentarily at his protégé, taking his measure. Obi-Wan, in his mid-twenties, was more than thirty years younger and still learning his craft. He was not yet a full Jedi, but he was close to being ready. Obi-Wan was shorter than Qui-Gon, but compact and very quick. His smooth, boyish face suggested an immaturity that had been long since shed. He wore the same type of clothes as Qui-Gon, but his hair was cut in the style of a Padawan learner, short and even, save for the tightly braided pigtail that hung over his right shoulder.

Qui-Gon was staring out the viewport at the interior of the Trade Federation battleship when he spoke again. "Why Naboo, do you think, my young apprentice? Why blockade this particular planet, when there are so many to choose from, most larger and more likely to feel the effects of such an action?"

Obi-Wan said nothing. Naboo was indeed an odd choice for an action of this sort, a planet at the edge of the galaxy, not particularly important in the scheme of things. Its ruler, Amidala, was something of an unknown. New to the throne, she had only been Queen a few months before the blockade had begun. She was young, but it was rumored she was prodigiously talented and extremely well trained. It was said she could hold her own with anyone in a political arena. It

was said she could be circumspect or bold when necessary, and was wise beyond her years.

The Jedi had been shown a hologram of Amidala before they left Coruscant. The Queen favored theatrical paint and ornate dress, cloaking herself in trappings and makeup that disguised her true appearance while lending her an aura of both splendor and beauty. She was a chameleon of sorts, masking herself to the world at large and finding companionship almost exclusively with a cadre of handmaidens who were always with her.

Qui-Gon hesitated a moment longer, thinking the matter through, then said to Obi-Wan, "Come, let's be off."

They passed downward through the bowels of the ship to the main hatch, waited for the light to turn green, and released the locking bar so that the ramp could lower. Raising their hoods to help conceal their faces, they stepped out into the light.

A protocol droid named TC-14 was waiting to escort them to their meeting. The droid took them from the bay down a series of hallways to an empty conference room and motioned them inside.

"I hope your honored sirs will be comfortable here." The tinny voice reverberated inside the metal shell. "My master will be with you shortly."

The droid turned and went out, closing the door softly behind. Qui-Gon watched it go, glanced briefly at the exotic, birdlike creatures caged near the door, then moved to join Obi-Wan at a broad window that looked out through the maze of Federation battleships to where the lush green sphere of Naboo hung resplendent against the dark sky.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said after a moment's contemplation of the planet.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I don't sense anything."

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's not about here, Master. It's not about this mission. It's something ... elsewhere. Something elusive ..."

The older Jedi put his hand on the other's shoulder. "Don't center on your anxiety, Obi-Wan. Keep your concentration on the here and now, where it belongs."

"Master Yoda says I should be mindful of the future—"

"But not at the expense of the present." Qui-Gon waited until his young apprentice was looking at him. "Be mindful of the living Force, my young Padawan."

To his credit, Obi-Wan managed a small smile. "Yes, Master." He looked out the viewport again, eyes distant. "How do you think the viceroy will deal with the supreme chancellor's demands?"

Qui-Gon gave an easy shrug. "These people are cowards. They will not be hard to persuade. The negotiations will be short."

On the bridge of the Trade Federation battleship, Neimoidian Viceroy Nute Gunray and his lieutenant, Daultay Dofine, stood staring in shock at the protocol droid they had sent to look after the supreme chancellor's ambassadors.

"What did you say?" Gunray hissed furiously.

TC-14 was impervious to the look the Neimoidian gave it. "The ambassadors are Jedi Knights. One of them is a Jedi Master. I am quite certain of it."

Dofine, a flat-faced, restless sort, wheeled on his companion in dismay. "I knew it! They were sent to force a settlement! The game's up! Blind me, we're done for!"

Gunray made a placating gesture. "Stay calm! I'll wager the Senate is completely unaware of the supreme chancellor's moves in this matter. Go. Distract them while I contact Lord Sidious."

The other Neimoidian gaped at him. "Are you brain-dead? I'm not going in there with two Jedi Knights! Send the droid!"

He waved hurriedly at TC-14, who bowed, made a small squeaky sound in response, and went out.

When the protocol droid was gone, Dofine summoned Rune Haako, the third member of their delegation, drew both his compatriots to a closed, separate space on the bridge where they could be neither seen nor heard by anyone else, and triggered a holographic communication.

It took a few moments for the hologram to appear. As it did so, a stoop-shouldered, dark-robed shape appeared, cloaked and hooded so that nothing of its face could be seen.

"What is it?" an impatient voice demanded.

Nute Gunray found his throat so dry that for a moment he could not speak. "The Republic ambassadors are Jedi Knights."

"Jedi?" Darth Sidious breathed the word softly, almost reverently. There was a measure of calm about his acceptance of the news. "Are you sure?"

Nute Gunray found what little courage he had been able to muster for this moment quickly evaporating. He stared at the black form of the Sith Lord in mesmerized terror. "They have been identified, my lord."

As if unable to endure the silence that followed, Daultay Dofine charged into the gap, wild-eyed. "This scheme of yours has failed, Lord Sidious! The blockade is finished! We dare not go up against Jedi Knights!"

The dark figure in the hologram turned slightly. "Are you saying you would rather go up against me, Dofine? I am amused." The hood shifted toward Gunray. "Viceroy!"

Nute stepped forward quickly. "Yes, my lord?"

Darth Sidious's voice turned slow and sibilant. "I don't want this stunted piece of slime to pass within my sight again. Do you understand?"

Nute's hands were shaking, and he clasped them together to still them. "Yes, my lord."

He wheeled on Dofine, but the other was already making his way from the bridge, his face filled with terror, his robes trailing behind him like a shroud.

When he was gone, Darth Sidious said, "This turn of events is unfortunate, but not fatal. We must accelerate our plans, Viceroy. Begin landing your troops. At once."

Nute glanced quickly at Rune Haako, who was trying his best to disappear into the ether. "Ah, my lord, of course, but ... is that action legal?"

"I will make it legal, Viceroy."

"Yes, of course." Nute took a quick breath. "And the Jedi?"

Darth Sidious seemed to grow darker within his robes, his face lowering further into shadow. "The supreme chancellor should never have brought the Jedi into this. Kill them now. Immediately."

"Yes, my lord," Nute Gunray answered, but the hologram of the Sith Lord had already vanished. He stared at the space it had left behind for a moment, then turned to Haako. "Blow up their ship. I will send a squad of battle droids to finish them."

In the conference room in which they had been left, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stared at each other across a long table.

"Is it customary for Neimoidians to make their guests wait this long?" the younger Jedi asked.

Before Qui-Gon could respond, the door opened to admit the protocol droid bearing a tray of drinks and food. TC-14 crossed to their table, placed the tray before them, and handed each a drink. It stepped back then, waiting. Qui-Gon motioned to his young companion, and they lifted the drinks and tasted them.

Qui-Gon nodded at the droid, then looked at Obi-Wan. "I sense an unusual amount of maneuvering for something as trivial as this trade dispute. I sense fear as well."

Obi-Wan placed his drink back on the table. "Perhaps—"

An explosion rocked the room, spilling the drinks, sending the tray with its food skidding toward the edge. The Jedi leapt to their feet in response, lightsabers drawn and activated. The protocol droid backpedaled quickly, arms lifting, muttering its apologies, looking every which way at once.

"What's happened?" Obi-Wan asked quickly.

Qui-Gon hesitated, closed his eyes, and retreated deep within

himself. His eyes snapped open. "They've destroyed our ship."

He glanced around swiftly. It took only a moment for him to detect a faint hissing sound from the vents near the doorway.

"Gas," he said to Obi-Wan in warning.

In the cage beside the door, the birdlike creatures began to drop like stones.

On the bridge, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako watched through a viewscreen as a squad of battle droids marched into the hallway just outside the conference room in which the Jedi were trapped. On crooked metal legs, they approached the doorway, blasters held at the ready, a hologram of Nute directing them from behind.

"They must be dead by now, but make certain," he directed the battle droids, and switched off the hologram.

The Neimoidians watched closely as the foremost of the battle droids opened the door and stepped back. A cloud of noxious green gas poured from the room, and a solitary figure stumbled into view, arms waving.

"Excuse me, sirs, I'm so sorry," TC-14 babbled as it maneuvered through the battle droids, holding aloft its tray of scattered food and spilled drinks.

In the next instant the Jedi appeared, charging from the room with lightsabers flashing. Qui-Gon's weapon sent a pair of the battle droids flying in a shower of sparks and metal parts that scattered everywhere. Obi-Wan's saber deflected blaster fire into several more. He raised his hand, palm outward, and another of the droids went crashing into the wall.

On the bridge viewscreen, smoke and lingering clouds of green gas obscured everything. Alarms began to sound throughout the battleship, reverberating off its metal skin.

"What in blazes is going on down there?" Nute Gunray demanded of his associate, eyes wide.

Rune Haako shook his head doubtfully. There was fear in his orange-red eyes. "You've never encountered Jedi Knights before, have you?"

"Well, no, not exactly, but I don't see ..." The alarms continued to blare, and suddenly Nute Gunray was unabashedly afraid. "Seal off the bridge!" he shouted frantically.

Rune Haako backed away as the doors to the bridge began to close. His voice was small and went unheard as he whispered to himself, "That won't be enough."

In seconds, the Jedi were standing in the hallway outside the bridge, dispatching the last of the battle droids that stood in their way. An unstoppable force, the two men worked in unison against

their adversaries, seemingly able to anticipate every form of attack. Lightsabers flashed and stabbed in brilliant bursts of color. Droids and blasters fell away in broken pieces.

“I want destroyer droids up here at once!” Nute Gunray screamed, watching as one of the Jedi began cutting through the bridge door with his lightsaber. He felt his throat tighten and his skin begin to crawl. “Close the blast doors! Now!”

One after another, the blast doors began to shut and seal with hissing sounds. The crew stood transfixed as on the viewscreen the Jedi continued their attack, lightsabers cutting at the massive doors, melting away the steelcrete like soft butter. Mutters of disbelief were heard, and Nute screamed at them to be silent. Sparks showered off the blast door under attack by the Jedi, and a red spot appeared at its center where the larger man plunged his lightsaber into the metal almost up to its hilt.

The viewscreen suddenly went blank. At the center of the door, the metal began to turn molten and drop away.

“They’re still coming,” Rune Haako whispered, gathering his robes as he backed away further.

Viceroy Nute Gunray said nothing in response. *Impossible!* he was thinking. *Impossible!*

Qui-Gon was hammering at the blast door with every ounce of strength he possessed, determined to break through to the treacherous Neimoidians, when his instincts warned him of danger from another quarter.

“Obi-Wan!” he shouted to his companion, who wheeled toward him at once. “Destroyer droids!”

The younger Jedi nodded, smiling. “Offhand, I’d say this mission is past the negotiation stage.”

In the hallway just beyond the area in which the Jedi fought, ten destroyer droids rolled into view. They resembled gleaming metal wheels as they rounded a corner, smooth and silent in their approach. One by one they began to unfold, releasing tripods of spidery legs and stunted arms into which laser guns had been built. Crooked spines unlimbered, and the droids rose to a standing position, armored heads cocked forward. They were wicked-looking and deadly, and they were built for one purpose only.

Skittering around the final corner to the bridge entry, they triggered their laser guns, filling the open area with a deadly crossfire. When the lasers went still, the destroyer droids advanced, searching for their prey.

But the anteway was empty, and the Jedi Knights were gone.

On the bridge, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako watched the

viewscreen flicker back to life. The destroyer droids were reverting to their wheeled forms, spinning away across the entry and down the hallway, clearly in pursuit of the Jedi.

“We have them on the run,” Rune Haako breathed, scarcely able to believe their good fortune.

Nute Gunray said nothing, thinking that their escape had been entirely too close. It was ridiculous that they should be fighting Jedi Knights in any event. This was a matter of commerce, not of politics. The Trade Federation was fully justified in resisting the Republic Senate’s foolish decision to impose a tax on trade routes when there was no basis in law for doing so. That the Neimoidians had found an ally to stand with them in this matter, to advise them on imposing a blockade and forcing a withdrawal of sanctions, was no cause for calling in the Jedi.

He hunched his shoulders and made a fuss over straightening his robes to disguise his shaking.

He was distracted suddenly by a call from the communications center behind him. “Sir, a transmission from the city of Theed on Naboo.”

The viewscreen to the planet flickered to life, and a woman’s face appeared. She was young, beautiful, and serene. An applied beauty mark of deepest crimson split her lower lip, and a golden headdress framed her powdery-white face. She stared out at the Neimoidians from the screen as if she were so far above and beyond them as to be unapproachable.

“It’s Queen Amidala herself,” Rune Haako whispered, just out of holocam view.

Nute Gunray nodded, moving closer. “At last we’re getting results,” he whispered back.

He moved to where he could be seen by the Queen. Cloaked in her ceremonial robes, Amidala sat on her throne, an ornate chair on a raised dais fronted by a low, flat-surfaced divider. The Queen was surrounded by five handmaidens, all of them cloaked and hooded in crimson. Her gaze was steady and direct as it took in the viceroy’s leathery countenance.

“The Trade Federation is pleased you have chosen to come before us, Your Highness,” he began smoothly.

“You will not be so pleased when you hear what I have to say, Viceroy,” she said flatly, cutting him short. “Your trade boycott is ended.”

Nute fought down his shock, regained his composure, and smirked at Rune. “Really, Your Highness? I was not aware—”

“I have word that the Senate is finally voting on the matter,” she continued, ignoring him.

“I take it you know the outcome already, then.” Nute felt a measure of uncertainty take hold. “I wonder why they bother to vote at all.”

Amidala leaned forward slightly, and the Neimoidian could see the fire in her brown eyes. “I have had enough of pretense, Viceroy. I am aware that the supreme chancellor’s ambassadors are with you now, and that you have been commanded to reach a settlement. What is it to be?”

Nute Gunray felt a deep hole open in his waning confidence. “I know nothing about any ambassadors. You must be mistaken.”

There was a flicker of surprise on the Queen’s face as she studied the viceroy carefully. “Beware, Viceroy,” she said softly. “The Federation has gone too far this time.”

Nute shook his head quickly, drawing himself up in a defensive posture. “Your Highness, we would never do anything in defiance of the Senate’s will. You assume too much.”

Amidala sat motionless, brown eyes fixed on him—as if she could see the truth he was trying to hide, as if he were made of glass. “We shall see,” she said softly.

The viewscreen went blank. Nute Gunray drew a long breath and exhaled slowly, not caring much for how this woman made him feel.

“She’s right,” Rune Haako said at his elbow. “The Senate will never let—”

Nute lifted one hand to cut him short. “It’s too late now. The invasion is under way.”

Rune Haako was silent for a moment. “Do you think she suspects an attack?”

The viceroy wheeled away. “I don’t know, but I don’t want to take any chances. We must move quickly to disrupt all communications down there until we’re finished!”

In the main hangar bay of the ship, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi crouched silently in the opening of a large circulation vent that overlooked six massive double-winged Federation landing ships surrounded by a vast array of transports. The transports were large boot-shaped vehicles with bulbous noses. The doors that formed those noses gaped open, racks were extended, and thousands of sleek silvery shapes were marching inside in perfect formation to be secured.

“Battle droids,” Qui-Gon said softly. There was surprise and dismay in his deep voice.

“It’s an invasion army,” Obi-Wan said.

They continued to watch for a time, taking in the scene, counting transports and droids as they filled the half-dozen landing craft, taking measure of the size of the army.

“It’s an odd play for the Federation,” Qui-Gon observed. “We’ve got

to warn the Naboo and contact Chancellor Valorum.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “We’d best do it somewhere besides here.”

His mentor glanced at him. “Maybe we can hitch a ride with our friends down there.”

“It’s the least they can do after the way they’ve treated us so far.” Obi-Wan pursed his lips. “You were right about one thing, Master. The negotiations were short.”

Qui-Gon Jinn smiled and beckoned him ahead.

A twilight that was misty and seemed perpetual lay in silvery gray layers over the green lushness of Naboo as the Federation landing ships descended out of the black infinity of space to settle slowly planetward. One set of three moved away from the others, dropping silently through clouds that hung still and endless across the world's emerald surface. Ghostlike as they passed through the haze, double wings shaped like a giant *I*, they materialized one by one near a vast, murky swamp. As they gently landed next to the dark waters and clumps of trees and grasses, their metal bodies parted to allow the bulbous-nosed transports to offload onto the surface and begin forming up.

Some distance away from the closest of the landing craft, Obi-Wan Kenobi's head broke the swamp's still waters. A quick breath, and he was gone again. He surfaced once more, farther away, and this time took a moment to look back at the invasion force. Dozens of transports filled with battle droids and tanks were moving into place in front of the landing craft. Some hovered above the swamp's waters. Some had found purchase on dry ground.

Far to his left, he caught sight of a shadowy form running through the mist and trees. Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan took another deep breath, submerged swiftly, and began to swim.

Qui-Gon Jinn slipped wraithlike through the swamp, listening to the sounds of heavy rustling and snapping branches behind him as the Trade Federation transports began to advance. Mixed with the deeper, heavier whine of the transport engines was the higher pitched buzzing of STAPs—single trooper aerial platforms—small, individually piloted mobile gun units used to transport battle droids as scouts for the main army. The STAPs whipped above the watery terrain of Naboo, fleeting shadows as they surged in front of the larger transports.

Animals of all shapes and sizes began to scatter from their places of concealment, racing past Qui-Gon in search of safety. Ikopi, fulumpasets, motts, peko pekos—the names recalled themselves instantly to the Jedi Master from his preparation for this journey. Dodging the frightened creatures stampeding around him, he cast

about for Obi-Wan, then picked up his pace as the dark shadow of a transport appeared out of the mist directly behind him.

He was running out of firm ground and searching for a way past a large lake when he saw a strange froglike creature before him. It was squatting in the water, its rubbery body crouched over a shell it had just pried open, its long tongue licking out the insides with a quick whipping movement, its throat swallowing. Casting aside the empty shell, it rose to face Qui-Gon, its long, flat ears dangling from its amphibious head in broad flaps, its ducklike snout working thoughtfully around whatever delicacy it had removed from the shell. Eyes that protruded from the top of its head blinked in confusion, taking in Qui-Gon and the animals about him, then seeing clearly for the first time the massive shadow from which they fled.

"Oh, oh," the creature muttered, the syllables clouded, but recognizable.

Qui-Gon broke left past the strange creature, anxious to get out of the path of the approaching transport. The creature dropped the shell, eyes wide and frantic, and grabbed onto Qui-Gon's robes.

"Hep me, hep me!" it cried plaintively, rubbery face contorting in shock and desperation.

"Let go!" Qui-Gon snapped, trying in vain to break free.

The transport thundered toward them, skimming the surface of the swamp, flattening grasses and stirring up water spouts in the wake of its passing. It bore down on Qui-Gon as he fought to break free of the creature that clung to him, dragging it sideways in a futile effort to escape.

Finally, with the transport only meters away and looming over him like a building about to topple, the Jedi Master pushed the creature into the shallow water and sprawled facedown on top of it. The Trade Federation transport passed over them in a wash of sound and shocked air, the vibrations hammering into their prone forms, flattening them into the mire.

When it was safely past, Qui-Gon pulled himself out of the mud and took a deep, welcome breath. The strange creature rose with him, still clinging to his arm, cloudy water dripping from its flat-billed face. It gave a quick glance after the departing transport, then threw itself on Qui-Gon, hugging him ecstatically.

"Oh boi, oh boi!" it gasped with a high-pitched, warbled sound. "I love yous, love yous forever!"

The creature began kissing him.

"Let go!" Qui-Gon huffed. "Are you brainless? You almost got us killed!"

The creature looked offended. "Brainless? I speak!"

"The ability to speak does not make you intelligent!" Qui-Gon was

having none of it. “Now let go of me and get out of here!”

He freed himself from the creature and began to move off, glancing around uneasily as the high-pitched buzz of STAPs sounded in the distance.

The creature hesitated, then began trailing after him. “No, no, me stay wit you! Me stay! Jar Jar be loyal, humble Gungan servant. Be yous friend, me.”

The Jedi Master barely glanced at him, watching the shadows, searching now for Obi-Wan. “Thanks, but that won’t be necessary. Better be off with you.”

Jar Jar the Gungan splashed after him, billed mouth working, arms waving. “Oh, bot tis necessary! Tis demanded by da Guds. Tis life debt. Me know dis, sure as name be Jar Jar Binks!”

The swamp reverberated with the sound of STAP engines, and now two of the gun platforms burst from the mist, bearing down on a fleeing Obi-Wan Kenobi, battle droid drivers wheeling their speeders to the attack.

Qui-Gon pulled free his lightsaber, motioning Jar Jar away. “I have no time for this now—”

“But must take me wit yous, keep me—” Jar Jar stopped, hearing the STAPs, turning to see them bearing down, eyes going wide all over again. “Oh, oh, we gonna—”

Qui-Gon grabbed the Gungan and threw him facedown in the swamp water once more. “Stay put.” He flicked on the lightsaber, bracing himself as Obi-Wan and the pursuing STAPs approached.

Jar Jar’s head popped up. “We gonna die!” he screamed.

The battle droids opened fire with laser cannons from their gun platforms just as Obi-Wan reached his friend. Qui-Gon blocked the bolts with his lightsaber and deflected them back into the attack craft. The STAPs exploded in shards of hot metal and fell into the swamp.

An exhausted Obi-Wan wiped his muddied brow, gasping for breath. “Sorry, Master. The swamp fried my lightsaber.”

He pulled out his weapon. The business end was blackened and burned. Qui-Gon took it from him and gave it a cursory inspection. Behind him, Jar Jar Binks pulled himself out of the muddy swamp water and blinked curiously at the newly arrived Jedi.

“You forgot to turn off your power again, didn’t you, Obi-Wan?” his friend asked pointedly.

Obi-Wan nodded sheepishly. “It appears so, Master.”

“It won’t take long to recharge, but it will take some time to clean it up. I trust you have finally learned your lesson, my young Padawan.”

“Yes, Master.” Obi-Wan accepted the proffered lightsaber with a chagrined look.

Jar Jar pushed forward, amphibious feet flopping, ears flapping,

long limbs looking as if they might take him in almost any direction. "Yous save me again, hey?" he asked Qui-Gon rhetorically.

Obi-Wan stared. "What's this?"

"A Gungan. One of the locals. His name's Jar Jar Binks." Qui-Gon's attention was directed out at the swamp. "Let's go, before more of those STAPs show up."

"More?" Jar Jar gasped worriedly. "Yous say more?"

Qui-Gon was already moving, shifting into a steady trot through the mire. Obi-Wan was only a step behind, and it took a moment for Jar Jar to catch up to them, his long legs working frantically, his eyes rolling.

"Exsqueeze me, but da most grand safest place is in Otoh Gunga," he gasped at them, trying to catch their attention. All about, lost somewhere in the mists, STAPs sounded their high-pitched whine. "Otoh Gunga," Jar Jar repeated. "Tis where I grew. Tis safe city!"

Qui-Gon brought them to a halt, staring fixedly now at the Gungan. "What did you say? A city?" Jar Jar nodded eagerly. "Can you take us there?"

The Gungan seemed suddenly distraught. "Ah, oh, oh ... mebbe me not rilly take yous ... not rilly, no."

Qui-Gon leaned close, his eyes dark. "No?"

Jar Jar looked as if he wished he could disappear into the swamp completely. His throat worked and his billed mouth opened and closed like a fish's. "Tis embarrassment, but ... me afraid me be banished. Sent oot. Me forget Boss Nass do terrible hurt to me if go back dere. Terrible bad hurt."

A low, deep, pulsating sound penetrated the whine of the STAPs, rising up through mist and gloom, growing steadily louder. Jar Jar glanced around uneasily. "Oh, oh."

"You hear that?" Qui-Gon asked softly, placing a finger on the Gungan's skinny chest. Jar Jar nodded reluctantly. "There's a thousand terrible things heading this way, my Gungan friend ..."

"And when they find you, they will crush you into dust, grind you into little pieces, and then blast you into oblivion," Obi-Wan added with more than a little glee.

Jar Jar rolled his eyes and gulped. "Oh, oh. Yous point very good one." He gestured frantically. "Dis way! Dis way! Hurry quick!"

In a rush, they raced away into the twilight mist.

Sometime later, the Jedi and the Gungan emerged from a deep stand of swamp grass and thick rushes at the edge of a lake so murky that it was impossible to see anything in the reflection of twilight off the surface. Jar Jar bent double, three-fingered hands resting on bony knees as he fought to catch his breath. His rubbery form twisted this

way and that as he looked back in the direction from which they had come, long ears flapping with the movement. Obi-Wan shook his head at Qui-Gon Jinn in faint reproof. He was not happy with the Jedi Master's decision to link up with this foolish-looking creature.

Somewhere in the distance, they could hear the steady, deep thrum of Federation transport engines.

"How much farther?" Qui-Gon pressed their reluctant guide.

The Gungan pointed at the lake. "We go underwater, okeday?"

The Jedi looked at each other, then extracted small containers from their clothing, releasing portable breathing devices the size of the palms of their hands.

"Me warning yous." Jar Jar's eyes shifted from one to the other. "Gungans no like yous outlanders. Yous not gonna get warm welcome."

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Don't worry. This hasn't been our day for warm welcomes."

"Get going," Qui-Gon motioned, fitting the device between his teeth.

The Gungan shrugged, as if to disclaim all responsibility for what would follow, turned back to the lake, performed a wild double somersault, and disappeared into the gloom.

The Jedi waded after him.

Downward into the murkiness they swam, the Jedi following the slender form of the Gungan, who seemed far more at home in the water than on land. He swam smoothly and gracefully, long limbs extended, body undulating with practiced ease. They swam for a long time, angling steadily deeper, the light from the surface fading slowly away behind them. What light there was came from sources beneath the surface, not all of them visible. The minutes slipped away, and Obi-Wan began to have second thoughts about what they were doing.

Then suddenly there was a new light, this one a steady glow that came from ahead. Slowly Otoh Gunga came into view. The city was comprised of a cluster of bubbles that connected to one another like balloons and were anchored to several huge rock pillars. One by one, the bubbles grew more distinct, and it became possible to make out the particulars of the structures within and the features of the Gungans as they moved about their business.

Jar Jar swam directly toward one of the larger bubbles, the Jedi close on his heels. When he reached the bubble, he pushed at it with his hands and it gave way to him, accepting first his arms, then his head and body, and finally his legs, swallowing him whole and closing behind him without rupturing. Amazed, the Jedi followed, moving through the strange membrane, entering the bubble without resistance.

Once inside, they found themselves on a platform that led down to a square surrounded by buildings. Light emanated from the bubble's walls in a steady glow, brightening the space inside. The Jedi found the air breathable. As they descended to the square below, water dripping from their clothing, Gungans began to catch sight of them and to scatter with small cries of alarm.

In short order a squad of uniformed Gungan soldiers appeared, riding two-legged mounts with billed faces not entirely dissimilar to their own. Kaadu, Qui-Gon recalled—swamp runners with powerful legs, great endurance, and keen senses. The Gungans carried long, deadly-looking electropoles, which they used to motion back the distraught populace at the same time they advanced on the intruders.

“Heyday ho, Cap’n Tarpals,” Jar Jar greeted the leader of the squad cheerfully. “Me back!”

“Notta gain, Jar Jar Binks!” the other snapped, clearly irritated. “Yous goen ta Boss Nass. See what he say. Yous mebbe in big trubble dis time.”

Ignoring the Jedi, he gave Jar Jar a quick poke with his electropole, sending a shock through the hapless Gungan that lifted him a half meter off the ground. Jar Jar rubbed his backside ruefully, muttering.

The Gungan soldiers took them through the buildings of the city, down several connecting passages, and into what, Jar Jar whispered to his companions, was the High Tower Boardroom. The room was transparent on all sides, and small glowing fish swam about the outside of the membrane, tiny stars against a darker backdrop. A long, circular bench dominated one end of the room with one section set higher than the rest. All the seats were occupied by Gungan officials in their robes of office, and a way was quickly made for the newcomers through Gungans already present to conduct other business.

The Gungan occupying the highest seat was a heavy-set, squat fellow so compressed by age and weight that it was impossible to imagine he had ever been as slender as Jar Jar Binks. Folds of skin draped from his body in loose layers, his neck was compressed into his shoulders, and his face bore such a sour look that even Jar Jar seemed more than a little cowed as they were motioned forward.

The Gungan officials stared, muttering among themselves as the Jedi approached. “What yous want, outlanders?” Boss Nass rumbled at them, after identifying himself.

Qui-Gon Jinn told him, relating what had brought the Jedi to Naboo, warning of the invasion taking place above, asking the Gungans to give them help. The Gungan council listened patiently, saying nothing until Qui-Gon was finished.

Boss Nass shook his head, the flesh of his thick neck jiggling with the movement. “Yous can’t be here. Dis army of maccaneks up dere tis

not our problem.”

Qui-Gon held his ground. “That army of battle droids is about to attack the Naboo. We must warn them.”

“We no like da Naboo!” Boss Nass growled irritably. “And dey no like da Gungans. Da Naboo think dey more smart den us. Dey think dey brains so big. Dey have nутten ta do wit us cause we live in da swamp and dey live up dere. Long time no have nутten ta do wit each other. Dis not gonna change because of maccaneks.”

“After that army takes control of the Naboo, they will come here and take control of you,” Obi-Wan said quietly.

Boss Nass chuckled. “No, me think not. Me talk mebbe one, two times wit Naboo in whole life, and no talk ever wit maccaneks. Maccaneks no come here! Dey not even know Gungans exist!”

The remaining members of the council nodded in agreement, muttering their verbal approval of Boss Nass’s wisdom.

“You and the Naboo are connected,” Obi-Wan insisted, his youthful face intent, not ready to concede the matter. “What happens to one will affect the other. You must understand this.”

Boss Nass dismissed him with a wave of one thick hand. “We know nутten of yous, outlander, and we no care about da Naboo.”

Before Obi-Wan could continue his argument, Qui-Gon stepped forward. “Then speed us on our way,” he demanded, bringing up one hand in a casual motion, passing it smoothly before the Gungan chief’s eyes in a quick invocation of Jedi mind power.

Boss Nass stared at him, then nodded. “We speed yous far away.”

Qui-Gon held his gaze. “We need transport to Theed.”

“Okeday.” Boss Nass nodded some more. “We give yous bongo. Da speedest way tada Naboo is goen through da core. Yous go now.”

Qui-Gon stepped back. “Thank you for your help. We go in peace.”

As the Jedi turned to leave, Obi-Wan whispered, “Master, what is a bongo?”

Qui-Gon glanced at him and cocked one eyebrow thoughtfully. “A ship of some sort, I hope.”

They were moving away from Boss Nass and the other Gungan officials when they caught sight of Jar Jar Binks standing forlornly to one side, wearing wrist binders and awaiting his fate. Qui-Gon slowed and made eye contact with the unfortunate creature.

“Master,” Obi-Wan said softly in warning. He knew Qui-Gon too well not to see what was coming.

The tall Jedi moved over to Jar Jar and stood looking at him.

“Dey setten yous up for bad fall!” the Gungan declared sullenly, glancing around to see if anyone else might be listening. “Goen through da core is bad danger.”

Qui-Gon nodded. “Thank you, my friend.”

Jar Jar Binks shrugged and looked sad. "Ahhh, tis okay." Then he gave the Jedi Master a slow, sheepish grin and a hopeful look. "Hey, any hep here would be hot."

Qui-Gon hesitated.

"We are short of time, Master," Obi-Wan advised quietly, moving to his side.

The Jedi Master turned to face his protégé, eyes distant. "Time spent here may help us later. Jar Jar might be of some use."

Obi-Wan shook his head in frustration. His mentor was too eager to involve himself when it was not necessary. He was too quick to adopt causes that were not his own. It had cost him time and time again with the Jedi Council. One day it would be his undoing.

He bent close. "I sense a loss of focus."

Qui-Gon's eyes fixed on him. "Be mindful, young Obi-Wan," he chastised gently. "Your sensitivity to the living Force is not your strength."

The younger Jedi held his gaze only a moment, then looked away, stung by the criticism. Qui-Gon turned from him and walked back to Boss Nass. "What is to become of Jar Jar Binks?" he asked.

Boss Nass, who was engaged in conversation with another of the Gungan officials, turned to him in annoyance, his heavy jowls puffing. "Binks breaks nocome-back law. Breaks exile. He be punished."

"Not too severely, I trust?" the Jedi Master pressed. "He has been of great help to us."

A slow laugh rumbled out of Boss Nass. "Pounded unto death, dis one."

Somewhere in the background, Jar Jar Binks moaned loudly. There were mutterings about the room. Even Obi-Wan, who was back at his Master's side, looked shocked.

Qui-Gon was thinking fast. "We need a navigator to get us through the core to Theed. I saved Jar Jar's life on the surface. He owes me for that. I claim a life debt on him."

Boss Nass stared at the Jedi in silence, a deep frown furrowing his brow and twisting his mouth. His head seemed to sink deeper into his shoulders, into the wattles of skin that obscured his neck.

Then his small eyes sought the unfortunate Jar Jar, and he gestured. "Binks?"

Jar Jar moved forward obediently to stand beside the Jedi.

"Yous haf life debt wit dis outlander?" Boss Nass demanded darkly.

Jar Jar nodded, head and ears hanging, but a flicker of hope springing into his eyes.

"Your gods demand he satisfy that debt," Qui-Gon insisted, passing his hand in front of Boss Nass's eyes, invoking his Jedi power once more. "His life belongs to me now."

The head Gungan considered the matter only a moment before nodding in agreement. "His life tis yours. Worthless, anyhow. Begone wit him."

A guard came forward and removed Jar Jar's wrist binders.

"Come, Jar Jar," Qui-Gon Jinn advised, turning him away.

"Through da core?" Jar Jar gasped, realizing suddenly what had happened. "Count me outta dis! Better dead here den dead in da core! Me not go ..."

But by then the Jedi were dragging him out of the room and all sight and sound of Boss Nass.

On the bridge of the Trade Federation's lead battleship, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako stood alone before a hologram of Darth Sidious. Neither of the Neimoidians was looking at the other, and both were hoping the Sith Lord could not sense what they were thinking.

"The invasion is on schedule, my lord," the viceroy was saying, robes and headdress hiding the occasional twitching of his limbs as he faced the cloaked and hooded form before him. "Our army nears Theed."

"Good. Very good." Darth Sidious spoke in a soft, calm voice. "I have the Senate bogged down in procedures. By the time this incident comes up for a vote, they will have no choice but to accept that your blockade has been successful."

Nute Gunray glanced quickly at his compatriot. "The Queen has great faith that the Senate will side with her."

"Queen Amidala is young and naive. You will find controlling her will not be difficult." The hologram shimmered. "You have done well, Viceroy."

"Thank you, my lord," the other acknowledged as the hologram faded away.

In the ensuing silence, the Neimoidians turned to each other with knowing looks. "You didn't tell him," Rune Haako said accusingly.

"Of the missing Jedi?" Nute Gunray made a dismissive gesture. "No need to tell him that. No need to tell him anything until we know for certain what has happened."

Rune Haako studied him a long time before turning away. "No, no need," he said softly, and walked from the room.



Obi-Wan Kenobi sat hunched over the controls of the bongo, familiarizing himself with their functions as Jar Jar Binks, positioned next to him, rambled on and on about nothing. Qui-Gon sat in the shadows behind them, silent and watchful.

“Dis is nutsen!” Jar Jar moaned as the bongo motored steadily away from the shimmering lighted bubbles of Otoh Gunga and deeper into the waters of Naboo.

The bongo was an ungainly little underwater craft that consisted mostly of an electrical power plant, guidance system, and passenger seating. It looked somewhat like a species of squid, having flat, swept-back fins and aft tentacles that rotated to propel the craft. Three bubble-canopied passenger compartments were arranged symmetrically, one on each wing and the third forward on the nose.

The Jedi and the Gungan occupied the nose compartment, where Obi-Wan had assumed command of the controls and Jar Jar had been instructed to start directing them through the core. It seemed that there were underwater passageways all through the planet, and if you were able to locate the right one, you could cut travel time considerably.

Or in the alternative, Obi-Wan thought darkly, you could cut your own throat.

“We doomed,” Jar Jar muttered plaintively. His flat-billed face lifted away from the directional guidance system toward the Jedi, his long ears swaying like ridiculous flaps. “Heydey ho? Where we goen, Cap’n Quiggon?”

“You’re the navigator,” Qui-Gon observed.

Jar Jar shook his head. “Me? Yous dreaming. Don’t know nutten ‘bout dis, me.”

Qui-Gon placed a hand on the Gungan’s shoulder. “Just relax, my friend. The Force will guide us.”

“Da Force? What tis da Force?” Jar Jar did not look impressed. “Maxibig thing, dis Force, yous betcha. Gonna save me, yous, all us, huh?”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes in dismay. This was a disaster waiting to

happen. But it was Qui-Gon's disaster to manage. It was not his place to interfere. Qui-Gon had made the decision to bring Jar Jar Binks along, after all. Not because he was a skilled navigator or had displayed even the slightest evidence of talent in any other regard, but because he was another project that Qui-Gon, with his persistent disregard for the dictates of the Council, had determined had value and could be reclaimed.

It was a preoccupation that both mystified and frustrated Obi-Wan. His mentor was perhaps the greatest Jedi alive, a commanding presence at Council, a strong and brave warrior who refused to be intimidated by even the most daunting challenge, and a good and kind man. Maybe it was the latter that had gotten him into so much trouble. He repeatedly defied the Council in matters that Obi-Wan thought barely worthy of championing. He was possessed of his own peculiar vision of a Jedi's purpose, of the nature of his service, and of the causes he should undertake, and he followed that vision with unwavering single-mindedness.

Obi-Wan was young and impatient, headstrong and not yet at one with the Force in the way that Qui-Gon was, but he understood better, he thought, the dangers of overreaching, of taking on too many tasks. Qui-Gon would dare anything when he found a challenge that interested him, even if he risked himself in the undertaking.

So it was here. Jar Jar Binks was a risk of the greatest magnitude, and there was no reason to think that embracing such a risk would reap even the smallest reward.

The Gungan muttered some more, all the while casting about through the viewport as if seeking a road sign that would allow him to at least pretend he knew what he was doing. Obi-Wan gritted his teeth. Stay out of it, he told himself sternly. Stay out of it.

"Here, take over," he snapped at Jar Jar.

He moved out of his seat to kneel close to Qui-Gon. "Master," he said, unable to help himself, "why do you keep dragging these pathetic life-forms along with us when they are of so little use?"

Qui-Gon Jinn smiled faintly. "He seems that way now perhaps, but you must look deeper, Obi-Wan."

"I've looked deep enough, and there is nothing to see!" Obi-Wan flushed with irritation. "He is an un-needed distraction!"

"Maybe for the moment. But that may change with time." Obi-Wan started to say something more, but the Jedi Master cut him short. "Listen to me, my young Padawan. There are secrets hidden in the Force that are not easily discovered. The Force is vast and pervasive, and all living things are a part of it. It is not always apparent what their purpose is, however. Sometimes that purpose must be sensed first in order that it may be revealed later."

Obi-Wan's young face clouded. "Some secrets are best left concealed, Master." He shook his head. "Besides, why must you always be the one to do the uncovering? You know how the Council feels about these ... detours. Perhaps, just once, the uncovering should be left to someone else."

Qui-Gon looked suddenly sad. "No, Obi-Wan. Secrets must be exposed when found. Detours must be taken when encountered. And if you are the one who stands at the crossroads or the place of concealment, you must never leave it to another to act in your place."

The last of the lights from Otoh Gunga disappeared in a wash of murkiness, and the waters closed around them in a dark cloud. Jar Jar Binks was taking the craft ahead at a slow, steady speed, no longer muttering or squirming, his hands fixed on the controls. He flipped on the lights as darkness closed about, and the broad yellow beams revealed vast stretches of multicolored coral weaving and twisting away through the black.

"I respect your judgment in this, Master," Obi Wan said finally. "But it doesn't stop me from worrying."

Like all of the Jedi Knights, Obi-Wan Kenobi had been identified and claimed early in his life from his birth parents. He no longer remembered anything of them now; the Jedi Knights had become his family. Of those, he was closest to Qui-Gon, his mentor for more than a dozen years, who had become his most trusted friend.

Qui-Gon understood his attachment and shared it. Obi-Wan was the son he would never have. He was the future he would leave behind when he died. His hopes for Obi-Wan were enormous, but he did not always share his student's beliefs.

"Be patient with me, Obi-Wan," he replied softly. "A little faith sometimes goes a long way."

The bongo navigated a coral tunnel, the bridge work revealed in deep fissures of crimson and mauve in the glow of the little craft's lights. All about, brightly colored fish swam in schools through the craggy rock.

"Are the Gungans and the Naboo at war with each other?" Qui-Gon asked Jar Jar thoughtfully.

The Gungan shook his head. "No war. Naboo and Gungans don't fight. Long time ago, mebbe. Now, Naboo keep outta swamp, Gungans keep outta plains. Dey don't even see each other."

"But they don't like each other?" the Jedi Master pressed.

Jar Jar snorted. "Da Naboo gotta big heads, alla time think dey so much better den da Gungans! Big nuttens!"

Obi-Wan bent over Jar Jar Binks, his eyes directed out the viewport. "Why were you banished, Jar Jar?" he asked.

The Gungan made a series of small smacking sounds with his billed

lips. "Tis kinda long story, but keeping dis short, me ... oh, oh, ahhh ... kinda clumsy."

"You were banished because you're clumsy?" Obi-Wan exclaimed in disbelief.

The bongo turned down through an open stretch of water between two huge coral shelves. Neither the Jedi nor the Gungan saw the dark shape that detached itself from the larger outcropping and began to track them.

Jar Jar squirmed. "Me cause mebbe one or two little bitty axaudents. Boom da gasser, crash der Bosses' hey-blibber. Den dey banish me."

Obi-Wan was not entirely sure what Jar Jar was telling him. But before he could ask for clarification, there was a loud thump as something struck the bongo, causing it to lurch sharply to one side. A huge crustacean with multiple legs and massive jaws ringed with teeth had hooked them with its long tongue and was drawing them steadily toward its widespread maw.

"Opee sea killer!" Jar Jar cried in dismay. "We doomed!"

"Full speed ahead, Jar Jar!" Qui-Gon ordered quickly, watching the jaws open behind them.

But instead of pushing the throttles forward, Jar Jar panicked and jammed them into reverse, causing the little ship to fly directly into the mouth of their attacker. The bongo slammed into the back of the monster's throat with a heavy thump that sent the Jedi reeling over the seats and into the walls. Rows of jagged teeth began to close about them as the lights on the control panel flickered uncertainly.

"Oh, oh," Jar Jar Binks said.

Obi-Wan leapt quickly back into the copilot's seat. "Here, give me the controls!"

He seized the throttles and steering apparatus and shoved everything into forward, full speed ahead. To his surprise, the opee sea killer's mouth opened with a spasmodic jerk, and they shot through its teeth as if from a laser cannon.

"We free! We free!" Jar Jar was jumping about in his seat, ecstatic over their good fortune.

But a quick glance back revealed that they were lucky for a different reason than they thought. The opee sea killer was caught in the jaws of a creature so huge that it dwarfed even the beast it was eating. A long, eel-like hunter with clawed forelegs, rear fins, and a wicked pair of jaws was crunching the sea killer into tiny bits and swallowing it down eagerly.

"Sando aqua monster, oh, oh!" Jar Jar Binks moaned, burying his face in his hands.

Obi-Wan increased power, trying to put more distance between

themselves and this newest threat. The sando aqua monster disappeared behind them, but the lights of the bongo were flickering ominously. The little craft dived deeper, penetrating the planet's core. Suddenly something exploded inside a control panel behind them, showering the cabin with sparks. Seams split overhead, and water began leaking through the bongo's outer skin.

"Master," Obi-Wan said as the power-drive whine took a sudden dive, "we're losing power."

Qui-Gon was working over the troubled control panel, head lowered. "Stay calm. We're not in trouble yet."

"Not yet!" Jar Jar had lost all pretense of calm and was flailing about in his seat. "Monstairs out dere! Leakin in here. We sinkin with no power! Yous nuts! When yous think we in trubble?"

With that, the lights inside the bongo went completely black. Jar Jar Binks had his answer.

In the conference room of the lead battleship of the Trade Federation fleet, a hologram of Darth Sidious towered over Nute Gunray and Rune Haako. The Neimoidian viceroy and his lieutenant stood motionless before it, reddish orange eyes fixed and staring, reptilian faces betraying every bit of the fear that held them paralyzed.

The black-cloaked figure of Darth Sidious regarded them silently. There was no hint of expression on his shadowed countenance, which was mostly hidden within the folds of the cloak's hood. But the rigid posture of the Sith Lord's body spoke volumes.

"You disappoint me, Viceroy," he hissed at Nute Gunray.

"My lord, I am certain that all—" The subject of his anger tried futilely to explain.

"Worse, you defy me!"

The Neimoidian's face underwent a terrifying transformation. "No, my lord! Never! These Jedi are ... resourceful, that's all. Not easily destroyed—"

"Alive, then, Viceroy?"

"No, no, I'm sure they're dead. They must be. We—we just haven't been able to confirm it ... yet."

Darth Sidious ignored him. "If they are alive, they will show themselves. When they do, Viceroy, I want to know immediately. I will deal with them myself."

Nute Gunray looked as if he might collapse under the weight of the Sith Lord's penetrating stare. "Yes, my lord," he managed as the hologram vanished.

Inside the troubled bongo, Obi-Wan fought to keep control as the little craft began to drift aimlessly.

Abruptly the whine of the power drive came alive and the aft drive fins began to turn. "Power's back," Obi-Wan breathed gratefully.

The lights on the control panels blinked on, flickered, and steadied. The exterior directional lights followed, momentarily blinding them as they reflected off rock walls and jagged outcroppings. Then Jar Jar screamed. A new monster was sitting right in front of them, all spines and scales and teeth, crooked clawed forelegs raised defensively.

"Colo claw fish!" the Gungan shrieked. "Yous Jedi do something! Where da Force now, you think?"

"Relax," Qui-Gon Jinn said softly, placing his hand on Jar Jar's twitching shoulder. The Gungan jerked and promptly fainted.

"You overdid it," Obi-Wan observed, wheeling the bongo about and jetting away through the darkness.

Even without looking, he knew the colo claw fish was in pursuit. They were inside a tunnel that probably served as the creature's lair. They were lucky to have caught it by surprise. He angled the bongo toward the cave entrance and a series of overhangs that might provide them with a little protection on their way out. Something slammed into the bongo, held it fast momentarily, then released it. Obi-Wan increased power to the drive fins.

"Come on, come on!" he breathed softly.

They shot out of the cave directly into the jaws of the waiting sando aqua monster. The creature jerked back at the unexpected invasion, giving Obi-Wan just an instant to bank their craft hard to the right. The jaws of the aqua monster were still open as they sped between teeth the size of buildings.

Jar Jar's eyes flickered open. He caught sight of the teeth and promptly fainted again.

Out through a gap in the sando aqua monster's fangs they sped, the bongo shaking with the thrust of its power drive. But the colo claw fish, still in pursuit, did not veer aside quickly enough and flew right into the larger hunter's maw. The jaws came down, engulfing it.

Obi-Wan increased power to the drive fins as bits of the colo claw fish reemerged briefly through the sando aqua monster's grinding teeth, only to be sucked quickly from sight again.

"Let's hope that's all the snack he requires," the Jedi observed with a quick glance back.

Apparently it was, because it did not come after them. It took a while to revive Jar Jar and a good deal longer to complete their voyage through the core, but with the Gungan's somewhat questionable help, they finally emerged from the darkness of the deeper waters toward a blaze of sunlight. The bongo popped to the surface of an azure body of water, green hills and trees rising about them, clouds and blue sky overhead. Obi-Wan steered the little craft to

the nearest shore, shut down the engines, and released the nose hatch. Qui-Gon rose and looked around.

"We safe now," Jar Jar observed with a grateful sigh, leaning back in his seat. "Tis okeday, hey?"

"That remains to be seen," the Jedi Master said. "Let's be off."

He climbed from the bongo onto the shore and started away. Obi-Wan glanced meaningfully at Jar Jar and followed.

The Gungan stared doubtfully after the departing Jedi. "Me comen, me comen," he muttered, and hurried after.



It was a little more than a week after the Podrace and the encounter with the old spacer that Watto summoned Anakin into the musty confines of the junk shop and told him he was to take a speeder out to the Dune Sea to do some trading with the Jawas. The Jawas, scavengers, were offering a number of droids for sale or trade, some of them mechanics, and while Watto wasn't about to part with usable currency, he didn't want to pass up a bargain if it could be had for a favorable barter. Anakin had traded on Watto's behalf before, and the Toydarian knew that the boy was good at this, too.

The blue face hovered close to Anakin's own, tiny wings beating madly. "Bring me what I need, boy! And don't mess up!"

Anakin was entrusted with a variety of difficult-to-obtain engine and guidance systems parts that the Jawas would covet and Watto could afford to give up for the right set of droids. The boy was to take the speeder out into the Dune Sea for a midday meeting with the Jawas, make his trade, and be back by sunset. No detours and no fooling around. Watto hadn't forgiven him yet for losing the Podrace and smashing his best racer, and he was letting the boy know it.

"March the droids back if you can't barter for a float sled." Watto flitted about, issuing orders, a blue blur. "If they can't walk this far, they aren't of any use to me. *Peedunkel!* Make sure you don't get taken! My reputation is at stake!"

Anakin listened attentively and nodded at all the right places, the way he had learned to do over the years. It was only a little past midmorning and there was plenty of time to do what was needed. He had traded with the Jawas many times, and he knew how to make certain they did not get the best of him.

There was a great deal Watto didn't know about Anakin Skywalker, the boy thought to himself as he went out the door to claim his speeder and begin his journey. One of the tricks to being a successful slave was to know things your master didn't know and to take advantage of that knowledge when it would do you some good. Anakin had a gift for Podracing and a gift for taking things apart and putting them back together and making them work better than they

had before. But it was his strange ability to sense things, to gain insights through changes in temperament, reactions, and words, that served him best. He could tune in to other creatures, bond with them so closely he could sense what they were thinking and what they would do almost before they did. It had served him well in dealing with the Jawas, among others, and it gave him a distinct edge in bartering on Watto's behalf.

Anakin had a couple of important secrets he kept from Watto as well. The first was the protocol droid he was re constructing in his bedroom work area. It was far enough along that even though it was missing its skin and an eye, it could stand and move around, and its intelligence and communications processors were up and running. Good enough to do the job he required of it, he concluded, which was to accompany him on his bartering mission. The droid could listen in on the Jawas in their own peculiar language, which Anakin did not understand or speak particularly well. By doing so, it could let Anakin know if they were trying to slip anything by him. Watto didn't know how far he had gotten with the droid, and there wasn't much danger Watto could find out while they were out in the Dune Sea.

The second and more important secret concerned the Podracer the boy was building. He had been working on it for almost two years, salvaging bits and pieces as he went, assembling it under cover of an old tarp in an area of the common refuse dump in back of the slave housing. His mother had indulged him, mindful of his interest in taking things apart and putting them back together. She didn't see the harm in allowing him to have this project to work on in his spare time, and Watto knew nothing of the Pod.

That was an inspired bit of subterfuge on Anakin's part. He knew, just as with the droid, that if it appeared to have any value at all, Watto would claim it. So he deliberately kept it looking as if it were a complete piece of junk, disguising its worth in a variety of clever ways. To all intents and purposes, it would never run. It was just another childish project. It was just a little boy's dream.

But for Anakin Skywalker, it was the first step in his life plan. He would build the fastest Podracer ever, and he would win every race in which it was entered. He would build a starfighter next, and he would pilot it off Tatooine to other worlds. He would take his mother with him, and they would find a new home. He would become the greatest pilot ever, flying all the ships of the mainline, and his mother would be so proud of him.

And one day, when he had done all this, they would be slaves no longer. They would be free.

He thought about this often, not because his mother encouraged him in any way or because he was given any reason to think it might

happen, but simply because he believed, deep down inside where it mattered, that it must.

He thought about it now as he guided his speeder through the streets of Mos Espa, the protocol droid sitting in the rear passenger compartment, skeletal-like without its skin and motionless because he had deactivated it for the ride out. He thought about all the things he would do and places he would go, the adventures he would have and the successes he would enjoy, and the dreams he would see come true. He drove the speeder out from the city under Tatooine's suns, the heat rising off the desert sands in a shimmering wave, the light reflecting off the metal surface of the speeder like white fire.

He proceeded east for about two standard hours until he reached the edge of the Dune Sea. The meeting with the Jawas was already in place, arranged by Watto the day before by transmitter. The Jawas would be waiting by Mochot Steep, a singular rock formation about halfway across the sea. Goggles, gloves, and helmet firmly in place, the boy cranked up the power on the speeder and hastened ahead through the midday heat.

He found the Jawas waiting for him, their monstrous sandcrawler parked in the shadow of the Steep, the droids they wished to trade lined up at the end of the crawler's ramp. Anakin parked his speeder close to where the little robed figures waited, yellow eyes gleaming watchfully in the shadows of their hoods, and climbed out. He activated the protocol droid and ordered him to follow. With the droid trailing obediently, he walked slowly down the line of mechanicals, making a show of carefully studying each.

When he was finished, he drew his droid aside. "Which ones are best, See-Threepio?" he asked. He'd given it a number the night before, choosing *three* because the droid made the third member of his little family after his mother and himself.

"Oh, well, Master Anakin, I'm flattered that you would ask, but I would never presume to infringe on your expertise, my own being so meager, although I do have knowledge of some fifty-one hundred different varieties of droids and over five thousand different internal processors and ten times that many chips and—"

"Just tell me which ones are best!" Anakin hissed under his breath. He had forgotten that C-3PO was first and foremost a protocol droid and, while possessed of extensive knowledge, tended to defer to the humans he served. "Which ones, Threepio?" he repeated. "Left to right. Number them off to me."

C-3PO did so. "Do you wish me to enumerate their capabilities and design specialties, Master Anakin?" he asked solicitously, cocking his head.

Anakin silenced him with a wave of his hand as the head Jawa

approached. They bartered back and forth for a time, Anakin getting a sense of how far the Jawas could be pushed, how much subterfuge was taking place with regard to their droids, and how badly they wanted the goods he was offering in exchange. He was able to determine that several of the best droids were still inside the crawler, a fact that C-3PO picked up from an unguarded comment made by a Jawa off to one side. The head Jawa squeaked at him furiously, of course, but the damage was done.

Three more droids were brought out, and again Anakin took a few moments to inspect them, C-3PO at his side. They were good models, and the Jawas were not particularly eager to part with them for anything less than a combination of currency and goods. Anakin and the head Jawa, who were of about the same height and weight, stood nose to nose arguing the matter for a long time.

When the bartering was completed, Anakin had traded a little more than half of what he had brought as barter for two mechanic droids in excellent condition, three more multipurpose droids that were serviceable, and a damaged hyperdrive converter that he could put back into service in no time. He could have traded for another two or three droids, but the quality of those that remained wasn't sufficiently high to part with any more of Watto's goods, and Watto would be quick to see that.

There was no float sled to be had, so Anakin lined up the newly purchased droids behind the speeder, placed C-3PO in the rear passenger compartment to keep an eye on them, and set off for Mos Espa. It was just after midday. The little procession was a curious sight, the speeder leading, hovering just off the sand, thrusters on dead slow, the droids trailing behind, jointed limbs working steadily to keep pace.

"That was an excellent trade, Master Anakin," C-3PO advised cheerfully, keeping his one good eye on their purchases. "You are to be congratulated! I think those Jawas learned a hard lesson today! You really did show them a thing or two about hard bargaining! Why, that pit droid alone is worth much more than ..."

The droid rattled on incessantly, but Anakin let him alone, ignoring most of what he said, content to let his mind wander for a bit now that the hard part was done. Even with the droids slowing them down, they should reach the edge of the Dune Sea before midafternoon and Mos Espa before dark. He would have time to sneak C-3PO back into his bedroom and deliver the purchased droids and the balance of the trade goods to Watto. Maybe that would get him back in the Toydarian's good graces. Certainly Watto would be pleased with the converter. They were hard to come by out here, and if it could be made to work—which Anakin was certain it could—it would be worth

more than all the rest of the purchases combined.

They crossed the central flats and climbed the slow rise to Xelric Draw, a shallow, widemouthed canyon that split the Mospic High Range just inside the lip of the Dune Sea. The speeder eased inside the canyon, droids strung out in a gleaming mechanical line behind, passing out of sunlight into shadow. The temperature dropped a few degrees, and the silence changed pitch in the lee of the cliffs. Anakin glanced about warily, knowing the dangers of the desert as well as any who were from Mos Espa, although he was inclined to think from time to time that it was safer out here than in the city.

“... a four-to-one ratio of Rodians to Hutts when the settlement began to take on the look and feel of a trading center, although even then it was clear the Hutts were the dominant species, and the Rodians might just as well have stayed home rather than chance a long and somewhat purposeless flight ...”

C-3PO rambled on, changing subjects without urging, asking nothing in return for his nonstop narrative but to be allowed to continue. Anakin wondered if he was suffering some sort of sensory vocal deprivation from being deactivated for so long. These protocol droids were known to be temperamental.

His gaze shifted suddenly to the right, to something that seemed strange and out of place. At first it was just a shape and coloring amid the desert sand and rock, almost lost in the shadows. But as he stared harder, it took on fresh meaning. He banked the speeder sharply, bringing the line of droids around with him.

“Master Anakin, whatever are you doing?” C-3PO protested peevishly. His one eye fixed on Anakin. “Mos Espa is down the canyon draw, not through the side of the—Oh, my! Is that what I think it is? Master, there is every reason to turn right around—”

“I know.” Anakin cut the droid short. “I just want a look.”

C-3PO’s arms fluttered anxiously. “I must protest, Master Anakin. This is most unwise. If I am correct, and I must tell you that I have calculated that degree of probability at ninety-nine point seven, then we are headed directly toward ...”

But Anakin didn’t need to be told what lay ahead, having already determined exactly what it was. A Tusken Raider lay crumpled on the ground, half-buried by a pile of rocks close against the cliff face. The look and garb of the Sand People were unmistakable, even at this distance. Loose, tan-colored clothing, heavy leather gloves and boots, bandolier and belt, cloth-wrapped head with goggles and breath mask, and a long, dual-handled blaster rifle lying a meter away from an outstretched arm. A fresh scar slicing down from the cliff face bore evidence of a slide. The Raider had probably been hiding above when the rock gave way beneath his feet and buried him in the fall.

Anakin stopped the speeder and climbed down.

“Master Anakin, I don’t think this is a good idea at all!” C-3PO declared in a sharp tone of admonishment.

“I just want a look, that’s all,” the boy repeated.

He was wary and a little scared of doing this, but he had never seen a Tusken Raider up close, although he had heard stories about them all his life. The Tuskens were a reclusive, fierce, nomadic people who claimed the desert as their own and lived off those foolish enough to venture into their territory unprepared. On foot or astride the wild banthas they had claimed from the wastelands, they traveled where they chose, pillaging outlying homes and way stations, waylaying caravans, stealing goods and equipment, and terrorizing everyone in general. They had even gone after the Hutts on occasion. The residents of Mos Espa, themselves a less than respectable citizenry, hated the Sand People with a passion.

Anakin had not yet made up his mind about them. The stories were chilling, but he knew enough of life to know there were two sides to every story and mostly only one being told. He was intrigued by the wild, free nature of the Tuskens, of a life without responsibility or boundaries, of a community in which everyone was considered equal.

He left the speeder and walked toward the fallen Raider. Threepio continued to admonish him, to warn him he was making a mistake. In truth, he wasn’t all that sure the droid was wrong. But his trepidation was overcome by his curiosity. What could it hurt to have just the briefest of looks? His boyish nature surfaced and took control. He would be able to tell his friends he had seen one of the Sand People close up. He would be able to tell them what one really looked like.

The Tusken Raider lay sprawled facedown, arms akimbo, head turned to one side. Rocks and debris buried most of the lower part of his body. One leg lay pinned beneath a massive boulder. Anakin edged closer to where the blaster rifle lay, then reached down and picked it up. It was heavy and unwieldy. A man would have to be strong and skilled to handle one, he thought. He noted the strange carvings on the stock—tribal markings perhaps. He had heard the Tuskens were a tribal people.

Suddenly the fallen Raider stirred, drawing back one arm, bracing himself, and lifting his wrapped head. Opaque goggles stared directly at Anakin. The boy backed away automatically. But the Tusken just stared at him for a moment, taking in who he was and what he was doing, then laid his head down again.

Anakin Skywalker waited, wondering what he should do. He knew what Watto would say. He knew what almost everyone would say. Get out of there! Now! He put the blaster rifle down again. This was no business of his. He took a step back, then another.

The Tusken Raider lifted his head once more and stared at him. Anakin stared back. He could sense the pain in the other's gaze. He could feel his desperation, trapped and helpless beneath that boulder, stripped of his weapon and his freedom both.

Anakin's brow furrowed. Would his mother tell him to get out of there, too? What would she say, if she were there?

"Threepio," he called back to the droid. "Bring everybody over here."

Protesting vehemently with every step, C-3PO gathered up the newly purchased droids and herded them to where the boy stood staring at the fallen Tusken. Anakin put the droids to work clearing away the smaller rocks and stones, then rigged a lever and used the speeder's weight to tilt the rock just enough that they could pull the pinned man free. The Tusken was awake briefly, but then lapsed back into unconsciousness. Anakin had the droids check for other weapons and kept the blaster rifle safely out of reach.

While the Tusken Raider was unconscious, the droids laid him on his back so he could be checked for injuries. The leg pinned by the boulder was smashed, the bones broken in several places. Anakin could see the damage through the torn cloth. But he wasn't familiar with Tusken physiology, and he didn't know exactly what to do to repair the damage. So he applied a quick-seal splint from the medical kit in the speeder to freeze the leg in place and left it alone.

He sat down then and thought about what he should do next. The light was beginning to fail. He had spent too much time freeing the Tusken to reach Mos Espa before nightfall. He could make the edge of the Dune Sea by dark, but only by leaving the Tusken behind, untended and alone. Anakin frowned. Given the things that roamed the desert when it got dark, he might as well bury the man and have done with it.

So he had the droids pull a small glow unit out of the landspeeder. When twilight descended, he powered up the glow unit and attached an extender fuel pack to assure it would burn all night. He broke out an old dried food pack and munched absently as he stared at the sleeping Tusken. His mother would be worried. Watto would be mad. But they knew him to be capable and reliable, and they would wait until daybreak to do anything about his absence. By then, he hoped, he would be well on his way home.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" he asked C-3PO.

He had placed the speeder and the other droids under the lee of a cliff face behind the glow unit, safely tucked from view, but had kept C-3PO with him for company. Boy and droid sat huddled close together on one side of the glow unit while the Tusken Raider continued to sleep on the other.

"I am afraid I lack the necessary medical training and information to make that determination, Master Anakin," C-3PO advised, cocking his head. "I certainly think you have done everything you possibly could."

The boy nodded thoughtfully.

"Master Anakin, we really shouldn't be out here at night," the droid observed after a moment. "This country is quite dangerous."

"But we couldn't leave him, could we?"

"Oh, well, that's a very difficult determination to make." C-3PO pondered the matter.

"We couldn't take him with us either."

"Certainly not!"

The boy sat in silence for a time, watching the Tusken sleep. He watched him for so long, in fact, that it came as something of a surprise when the Tusken finally stirred awake. It happened all at once, and it caught the boy off guard. The Tusken Raider shifted his weight with a lurching movement, exhaled sharply, propped himself up on one arm, looked at himself, then looked at the boy. The boy made no move or sound. The Tusken regarded him intently for a long minute, then slowly eased into a sitting position, his wounded leg stretched out in front of him.

"Uh, hello," Anakin said, trying out a smile.

The Tusken Raider made no response.

"Are you thirsty?" the boy asked.

No response.

"I don't think he likes us very much," C-3PO observed.

Anakin tried a dozen different approaches at conversation, but the Tusken Raider ignored them all. His gaze shifted only once, to where his blaster rifle lay propped against the rocks behind the boy.

"Say something to him in Tusken," he ordered C-3PO finally.

The droid did. He spoke at length to the Tusken in his own language, but the man refused to respond. He just kept staring at the boy. Finally, after C-3PO had gone on for some time, the Tusken glanced at him and barked a single word in response.

"Gracious!" the droid exclaimed.

"What did he say?" the boy asked, excited.

"Why he—he told me to shut up!"

That was pretty much the end of any attempt at conversation. The boy and the Tusken sat facing each other in silence, their faces caught by the glow of the fire, the desert's darkness all around. Anakin found himself wondering what he would do if the Tusken tried to attack him. It was unlikely, but the man was large and fierce and strong, and if he reached the boy, he could easily overpower him. He could take back his blaster rifle and do with the boy as he chose.

But somehow Anakin didn't sense that to be the Tusken's intent. The Tusken made no effort to move and gave no indication he had any intention of trying to do so. He just sat there, wrapped in his desert garb, faceless beneath his coverings, locked away with his own thoughts.

Finally he spoke again. The boy looked quickly at C-3PO. "He wants to know what you are going to do with him, Master Anakin," the droid translated.

Anakin looked back at the Tusken, confused. "Tell him I'm not going to do anything with him," he said. "I'm just trying to help him get well."

C-3PO spoke the words in Tusken. The man listened. He made no response. He did not say anything more.

Anakin realized suddenly that the Tusken was afraid. He could sense it in the way the other spoke, in the way he sat waiting. He was crippled and weaponless. He was at Anakin's mercy. The boy understood the Tusken's fear, but it surprised him anyway. It seemed out of character. The Sand People were supposed to be fearless. Besides, he wasn't afraid of the Tusken. Maybe he should have been, but he wasn't.

Anakin Skywalker wasn't afraid of anything.

Was he?

Staring into the opaque lenses of the goggles that hid the Tusken Raider's eyes, he contemplated the matter. Most times he thought there was nothing that could frighten him. Most times he thought he was brave enough that he would never be afraid.

But in that most secret part of himself where he hid the things he would reveal to no one, he knew he was cheating on the truth. He might not ever be afraid for himself, but he was sometimes very afraid for his mother.

What if something were to happen to her? What if something awful were to happen to her, something he could do nothing to prevent?

He felt a shiver go down his spine.

What if he were to lose her?

How brave would he be then, if the person he was closest to in the whole, endless universe was suddenly taken away from him? It would never happen, of course. It couldn't possibly happen.

But what if it did?

He stared at the Tusken Raider, and in the deep silence of the night he felt his confidence tremble like a leaf caught in the wind.

He fell asleep finally, and he dreamed of strange things. The dreams shifted and changed without warning and took on different story lines and meanings as they did so. He was several things in the course of

his dreams. Once he was a Jedi Knight, fighting against things so dark and insubstantial he could not identify them. Once he was a pilot of a star cruiser, taking the ship into hyperspace, spanning whole star systems on his voyage. Once he was a great and feared commander of an army, and he came back to Tatooine with ships and troops at his command to free the planet's slaves. His mother was waiting for him, smiling, arms outstretched. But when he tried to embrace her, she vanished.

There were Sand People in his dreams, too. They appeared near the end, a handful of them, standing before him with their blaster rifles and long gaffi sticks lifted and held ready. They regarded him in silence, as if wondering what they should do with him.

He awoke then, jarred from his sleep by an unmistakable sense of danger. He jerked upright and stared about in confusion and fear. The glow unit had burned down to nothing. In the faint, silvery brightening of predawn, he found himself confronted by the dark, faceless shapes of the Sand People of his dreams.

Anakin swallowed hard. Motionless figures against the horizon's dim glow, the Tusken Raiders encircled him completely. The boy thought to break and run, but realized at once how foolish that would be. He was helpless. All he could do was wait and see what they intended.

A guttural muttering rose from their midst, and heads turned to look. Through a gap in the ranks, Anakin could just make out a figure being lifted and carried away. It was the Raider he had rescued, speaking to his people. The other Raiders hesitated, then slowly backed away.

In seconds, they were gone.

Sunlight began to crest the dark bulk of the Mospic, and C-3PO was speaking to him in a rush of words that tumbled over one another, the skeletal metal arms jerking this way and that.

"Master Anakin, they've gone! Oh, we're lucky to be alive! Thank goodness they didn't hurt you!"

Anakin climbed to his feet. There were Tusken Raider footprints everywhere. He glanced about quickly. The speeder and the droids obtained from the Jawas sat undisturbed beneath the overhang. The Tusken blaster rifle was gone.

"Master Anakin, what should we do?" C-3PO wailed in dismay.

Anakin looked around at the empty canyon floor, at the high ragged walls of the cliff face, and at the brightening sky where the stars were fading away. He listened to the deep silence and felt impossibly alone and vulnerable.

"We should go home," he whispered, and moved swiftly to make it happen.



Nute Gunray stood in silence at the center of the palace throne room in the Naboo capital city of Theed and listened patiently as Governor Sio Bibble protested the Trade Federation presence. Rune Haako stood at his side. Both wore their Federation robes of office and inscrutable expressions. Two dozen battle droids held the Naboo occupants of the room at gunpoint. The city had fallen shortly after sunrise. There had been little resistance; the Naboo were a peaceful people. The Trade Federation invasion had come as a surprise, and the droid army was inside the gates of the city before any substantial defense could be mounted. What few weapons there were had been confiscated and the Naboo removed to detention camps. Battle droids were combing the city even now to put an end to any lingering resistance.

Gunray resisted a smile. Apparently the Queen had believed right up to the end that negotiations would prevail and the Senate would provide the people of Naboo with protection.

"It is bad enough, Viceroy, that you dare to disrupt transmissions between the Queen and Senator Palpatine while he is attempting to argue our cause before the Republic Senate, bad enough that you pretend that this blockade is a lawful action, but landing an entire army on our planet and occupying our cities is too outrageous for words."

Sio Bibble was a tall, balding man with a sharply pointed beard and an even sharper tongue. He held the floor just at the moment, but Gunray was getting tired of listening to him.

He glanced at the other captives. Captain Panaka, the Queen's head of security, and four of the Queen's personal guards stood to one side, stripped of their weapons and helpless. Panaka was stone-faced and hard-eyed as he watched the Neimoidians. He was a big, powerfully built man with a dark, smooth face and quick eyes. The Neimoidian did not like the way those eyes were fixed on him.

The Queen sat upon her throne, surrounded by her handmaidens. She was serene and aloof, detached from everything, as if what was taking place had no effect on her, could not touch her in any way. She wore black, her white-painted face in sharp contrast to the black

feathered headdress that wrapped and framed it. A gold chain lay across her regal brow and the red beauty mark split her lower lip. She was considered beautiful, Gunray had been told, but he had no sense of human beauty and by Neimoidian standards she was simply colorless and small-featured.

What interested him was her youth. She was barely out of girlhood, certainly not a full-grown woman, and yet the people of Naboo had chosen her as their Queen. This wasn't one of those monarchies where blood determined right of rule and dynasties prevailed. The Naboo chose the wisest among them as their ruler by popular acclaim, and Queen Amidala governed at the sufferance of her people. Why they would choose someone so young and naive was a mystery to him. From his point of view it certainly hadn't served them well in this instance.

Governor Sio Bibble's voice echoed through the cavernous chamber, rising to the high, vaulted ceiling, bouncing off the smooth, sunlit walls. Theed was an opulent, prosperous city and the throne room reflected its history of success.

"Viceroy, I ask you point-blank." Sio Bibble was concluding his oration. "How do you intend to explain this invasion to the Senate?"

The Neimoidian's flat, reptilian countenance managed a small flicker of humor. "The Naboo and the Trade Federation will forge a treaty that will legitimize our occupation of Theed. I have been assured that such a treaty, once produced, will be quickly ratified by the Senate."

"A treaty?" the governor exclaimed in astonishment. "In the face of this completely unlawful action?"

Amidala rose from her throne and stepped forward, surrounded by her cloaked and hooded handmaidens. Her eyes were sharp with anger. "I will not cooperate."

Nute Gunray exchanged a quick glance with Rune Haako. "Now, now, Your Highness," he purred. "Don't be too hasty with your pronouncements. You are not going to like what we have in store for your people. In time, their suffering will persuade you to see our point of view."

He turned away. "Enough talk." He beckoned. "Commander?" Battle droid OOM-9 stepped forward, narrow metal snout lowering slightly in response. "Process them," the viceroy ordered.

OOM-9 signaled for one of his sergeants to take over, metallic voice directing that the prisoners be taken to Camp Four. The battle droids herded the Queen, her handmaidens, Governor Bibble, Captain Panaka, and the Naboo guards from the room.

Nute Gunray's slit reddish orange eyes followed them out, then shifted back to Haako and the room. He felt a deep sense of

satisfaction take hold. Everything was going exactly as it should.

The sergeant and a dozen battle droids moved the prisoners along the polished stone halls of the Theed palace and outside to where a series of terraced steps led downward through statuary and buttress work to a broad plaza. The plaza was filled with Federation tanks and battle droids and was empty of Naboo citizens. The tanks were squat, shovel-nosed vehicles with their main cannon mounted on a turret above and behind the cockpit and smaller blasters set low and to either side. They had the look of foraging beetles as they edged about the plaza's perimeter.

Beyond, the buildings of Theed stretched away toward the horizon, a vast sprawl of high stone walls, gilded domes, peaked towers, and sculpted archways. Sunlight bathed the gleaming edifices, their architecture in counterpoint to the lush greenness of the planet. The rush of waterfalls and bubble of fountains formed a soft, distant backdrop to the strange silence created by the absence of the populace.

The prisoners were taken across the plaza past the Trade Federation machines of war. No one spoke. Even Governor Bibble had gone silent, his gray-bearded head lowered in dark contemplation. They departed the plaza and turned down a broad avenue that led to the outskirts of the city and the newly constructed Trade Federation detention camps. STAPs hummed overhead, shadows flitting off the walls of the buildings, metal shells gleaming as they darted away.

The droids had just turned their prisoners down a quiet byway when their sergeant, who was leading the procession, brought them to an abrupt halt.

Two men stood directly in their way, both wearing loose robes over belted tunics, the taller with his hair worn long, the shorter with his cut to a thin braided pigtail. Their arms hung loosely at their sides, but they did not have the look of men who were unprepared.

For a moment, each group stared at the other in silence. Then the narrow face of a Gungan peeked out from behind the two robed figures, eyes wide and frightened.

Qui-Gon Jinn stepped forward. "Are you Queen Amidala of the Naboo?" he asked the young woman in the feathered headdress.

The Queen hesitated. "Who are you?"

"Ambassadors from the supreme chancellor." The Jedi Master inclined his head slightly. "We seek an audience with you, Your Highness."

The droid sergeant suddenly seemed to remember where he was and what he was doing. He gestured to his soldiers. "Clear them away!"

Four of the battle droids moved to obey. They were just shifting

their weapons into firing position when the Jedi activated their lightsabers and cut them apart. As the shattered droids collapsed, the Jedi moved quickly to dispatch the others. Laser bolts were blocked, weapons were knocked aside, and the remaining droids were reduced to scrap metal.

The sergeant turned to flee, but Qui-Gon brought up his hand, holding the droid fast with the power of the Force. In seconds, the sergeant lay in a ruined heap with his command.

Quickly, the Naboo soldiers moved to recover the fallen weapons. The Jedi Knights flicked off their lightsabers and motioned everyone out of the open street and into the shelter of an alley between two buildings. Jar Jar Binks followed, muttering in wonder at the cold efficiency with which the Jedi had dispatched their enemies.

Qui-Gon faced the Queen. "Your Highness, I am Qui-Gon Jinn and my companion is Obi-Wan Kenobi. We are Jedi Knights as well as ambassadors for the supreme chancellor."

"Your negotiations seem to have failed, Ambassador," Sio Bibble observed with a snort.

"The negotiations never took place." Qui-Gon kept his eyes directed toward the Queen. Her painted face showed nothing. "Your Highness," he continued, "we must make contact with the Republic."

"We can't," Captain Panaka volunteered, stepping forward. "They've knocked out all our communications."

An alarm was being given from somewhere close, and there was the sound of running. Qui-Gon glanced toward the street where the battle droids lay. "Do you have transports?"

The Naboo captain nodded, quick to see what the Jedi intended. "In the main hangar. This way."

He led the little group to the end of the alleyway, where they crossed to other passageways and backstreets, encountering no one. They moved quickly and silently through the growing sound of alarms and the wicked buzz of STAPs. To their credit, the Naboo did not resist Qui-Gon's leadership nor question his appearance. With Panaka and his men newly armed, the Naboo Queen and her companions had a sense of being in control of their own destiny once more and seemed more than ready to take a chance on their rescuers.

It did not take them long to reach their destination. A series of connected buildings dominated one end of a broad causeway, each one domed and cavernous, the central structures warded by arched entrances and low, flat-walled outbuildings. Battle droids were stationed everywhere, weapons held at the ready, but Captain Panaka was able to find an unguarded approach down a narrow corridor between adjoining buildings.

At a side door to the main hangar, Panaka brought the group to a

halt. After a quick glance over his shoulder for droids, he unlocked and nudged open the hangar door. With Qui-Gon Jinn pressed close, he peered inside. A handful of Naboo ships were grouped at the center of the hangar, sleek gleaming transports, their noses pointed toward a wide opening in the far wall. Battle droids guarded each, positioned across the entire floor of the hangar to cut off any unseen approach.

Panaka pointed to a long, low ship on the far side of the hangar with swept-back wings and powerful Headon-5 engines. "The Queen's personal transport," he whispered to the Jedi Master.

Qui-Gon nodded. A J-type 327 Nubian. In the distance, the alarms continued to sound their steady wail. "That one will do," he said.

Panaka scanned the hangar interior. "The battle droids. There are too many of them."

The Jedi eased back from the door. "That won't be a problem." He faced the Queen. "Your Highness. Under the circumstances, I suggest you come to Coruscant with us."

The young woman shook her head, the feathers on her headdress rustling softly. Her white-painted face was calm and her gaze steady. "Thank you, Ambassador, but my place is here with my people."

"I don't think so," Qui-Gon responded, locking eyes. "The Trade Federation has other plans. They will kill you if you stay."

Sio Bibble pushed to the Queen's side. "They wouldn't dare!"

"They need her to sign a treaty to make this invasion of theirs legal!" Captain Panaka pointed out. "They can't afford to kill her!"

The Queen looked from face to face, the barest flicker of uncertainty showing in her eyes.

"The situation here is not what it seems," Qui-Gon pressed. "There is something else going on, Your Highness. There is no logic to the Federation's actions. My instincts tell me they will destroy you."

A shadow of real alarm crossed Sio Bibble's face as the Jedi Master finished. His strong features melted slightly. "Your Highness," he said slowly. "Perhaps you should reconsider. Our only hope is for the Senate to take our side in this matter. Senator Palpatine will need your help."

Captain Panaka was having none of it. "Getting past their blockade is impossible, Your Highness—even if we were to get off the planet! An escape attempt is too dangerous—"

"Your Highness, I will stay here and do what I can," Sio Bibble interrupted, shaking his head at Panaka. "They will have to retain the Council of Governors in order to maintain some semblance of order. But you must leave—"

Queen Amidala brought up her hand sharply to silence the debate. Turning from her governor and head of security and the Jedi as well, she looked suddenly to her handmaidens, who were pressed close

about her. "Either choice presents great risk to all of us ...," she said softly, looking from face to face.

Qui-Gon watched the exchange, puzzled. What was the Queen seeking?

The handmaidens glanced at one another, faces barely visible within the confines of red and gold hooded robes. All were silent.

Finally, one spoke. "We are brave, Your Highness," Padmé said firmly.

Alarms continued to sound. "If you are to leave, Your Highness, it must be now," Qui-Gon urged.

Queen Amidala straightened and nodded. "So be it. I will plead our case before the Senate." She glanced at Sio Bibble. "Be careful, Governor."

She took the governor's hand briefly, then beckoned to three of her handmaidens. Those not chosen began to cry softly. Amidala embraced them and whispered words of encouragement. Captain Panaka selected two of the four guards to stay behind with the handmaidens and Sio Bibble.

The Jedi Knights moved through the side door and into the hangar, leading the way for Jar Jar and the Naboo. "Stay close," Qui-Gon admonished softly over his shoulder.

Captain Panaka moved next to him, dark face intense. "We need a pilot for the vessel." He pointed to where a group of Naboo were being held captive in a corner of the hangar by a squad of battle droids. The insignia on their uniforms indicated a mix of guards, mechanics, and pilots. "There."

"I'll take care of it," Obi-Wan declared, and veered toward the Naboo captives.

Qui-Gon and the rest continued on, striding boldly across the hangar floor, moving directly toward the Queen's vessel, ignoring the battle droids who moved to intercept them. Qui-Gon took note of the fact that the boarding ramp to the transport was lowered. More battle droids were closing on them, curious without yet being alarmed.

"Don't stop for anything," he said to the Queen, and he reached beneath his cloak for the lightsaber.

They were barely twenty meters from the Queen's transport when the nearest of the battle droids challenged them. "Where are you going?" it asked in its blank, metallic voice.

"Get out of the way," Qui-Gon ordered. "I am an ambassador for the supreme chancellor, and I am taking these people to Coruscant."

The droid brought up his weapon quickly, blocking the Jedi Master's passage. "You are under arrest!"

It was scrap metal within seconds, dissected by Qui-Gon's lightsaber. More of the battle droids rushed to stop the Jedi, who

stood alone against them as his charges boarded the Nubian vessel. Captain Panaka and the Naboo guards formed a protective screen for the Queen and her handmaidens as they hurried up the ramp. Jar Jar Binks clambered after, holding on to his head with his long arms. Laser bolts lanced through the hangar from all directions, and new alarms blared wildly.

On the far side of the hangar, Obi-Wan Kenobi launched himself at the battle droids holding the Naboo pilots hostage, cutting into them with ferocious determination. Qui-Gon watched his progress, long hair flying out as he withstood yet another rush from the battle droids attempting to reclaim the Queen's transport, blocking their laser bolts as he fought to hold the boarding ramp. Obi-Wan was running toward him now, a handful of the Naboo in tow. Explosions rose all around them, deadly laser fire burning into metal and flesh. Several of the Naboo went down, but the battle droids were unable to slow the Jedi.

Qui-Gon called sharply to Obi-Wan as he went past, telling him to get the ship in the air. More battle droids were appearing at the hangar doors, weapons firing. Qui-Gon backed quickly up the loading ramp and into the transport's dimly lit interior. The ramp rose behind him and closed with a soft whoosh.

The Headon-5 engines were firing even before the Jedi Master reached the main cabin and flung himself into a chair. Laser fire hammered at the sides of the sleek craft, but it was already beginning to move forward. The pilot sat hunched forward over the controls, his weathered face intense, a sheen of sweat beading his forehead, hands steady on the controls. "Hold on," he said.

The Nubian shot through the hangar doors, ripping past battle droids and laser fire, lifting away from the city of Theed into the blue, sunlit sky. The planet of Naboo was left behind in seconds, the ship rising into the darkness of space, arcing toward a suddenly visible cluster of Trade Federation battleships blocking its way.

Qui-Gon left his seat and came forward to stand beside the pilot.

"Ric Olié," the other announced with a quick glance up at the Jedi. "Thanks for helping out back there."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Better save your thanks until we deal with what's up here."

The pilot gave him a rakish grin. "Copy that. What do we do about these big boys? Our communications are still jammed."

"We're past the point of talking. Just keep the ship on course." Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan. "Make sure everyone is settled safely in place." His eyes moved to where Jar Jar Binks was already up and poking about.

The younger Jedi moved quickly to take the Gungan in hand, propelling him forcibly through the main cabin door and into the

anteway beyond. Ignoring Jar Jar's protests, he glanced about for somewhere to stash the bothersome creature. Catching sight of a low, cramped entry with the words **ASTROMECH DROIDS** lettered above, he released the retaining latch and shoved the Gungan inside.

"Stay here," he directed with a meaningful look. "And keep out of trouble."

Jar Jar Binks watched the door close behind him, then glanced around. A line of five R2 astromech droids stood against one wall, short, dome-topped, all-purpose mechanics painted different colors, their lights off, their engines quiet. Five identical units, each stout body positioned between two sturdy restraint arms, they gave no indication of being aware of him. The Gungan ambled along in front of them, waiting to be noticed. Maybe they weren't activated, he thought. Maybe they weren't even alive.

"Heydey ho, yous," he tried, hands gesturing. "Tis a long trip somewheres, hey?"

No response. Jar Jar tapped the closest R2 unit, a bright red droid, on the head. The tap made a hollow sound, and the head popped up a notch from the cylindrical body.

"Whoa!" Jar Jar said, surprised. He glanced around, wondering why the Jedi had put him down here when everyone else was up there. Nothing much to do down here, he thought disconsolately. Nothing much happening.

Curious, he gripped the red droid's head and lifted gently. "Dis opens?" he whispered. He lifted some more. Something caught. He yanked hard. "Dis ... ooops!"

The head lifted right out of its seating. Springs and wires popped out in a tangled mess. Jar Jar quickly jammed the red droid's head back into place, easing his three-fingered hands away cautiously.

"Oh, oh, oh," he murmured, glancing about to make sure no one had seen, hugging himself worriedly.

He moved down the line of droids, still looking for something to occupy his time. He didn't want to be in this room, but he didn't think he should try to leave, either. The younger Jedi, the one who had stuck him in here, didn't like him much as it was. The Jedi would like him a whole lot less if he caught Jar Jar sneaking out of this room.

Explosions sounded close by the transport. Cannon fire. The ship rocked in response to a series of near misses. Jar Jar looked about wildly, suddenly not liking where he was at all. Then the running lights began to flicker, and the transport shook violently. Jar Jar moaned, and crouched down in a corner. More explosions sounded, and the craft was buffeted from side to side.

"We doomed," the frightened Gungan muttered. "Tis bad business,

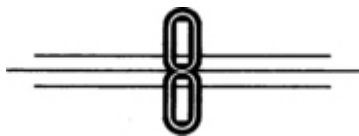
dis.”

Abruptly the ship began to spin as if caught in a whirlpool. Jar Jar cried out, fastening his arms about a strut to keep from being thrown against the walls. The lights in the compartment all came on, and the droids were abruptly activated. One by one, they began to whirl and beep. Released from their restraints, they rolled out of their racks toward an airlock at one end of the compartment—all but the red R2, who rolled directly into a wall and fell over, more parts tumbling out.

The R2 unit painted blue paused as it motored by its red counterpart, then charged past Jar Jar, giving out a loud screech that caused the Gungan to jerk away in fright.

One after another, the four R2 units entered the airlock lift and were sucked up toward the top of the ship.

Left behind in the storage compartment with the droid he had unwittingly sabotaged, Jar Jar Binks moaned in despair.



Obi-Wan Kenobi had just reentered the transport's cockpit when explosions began to buffet the ship. He could see a huge Trade Federation battleship looming ahead through the viewport, cannons firing. The Queen's transport was rocked so violently by the blasts that it was thrown from its trajectory. Ric Olié's gloved hands were locked onto the steering grips, fighting to bring the slender craft back into line.

"We should abort, sir!" the pilot shouted at Qui-Gon, who was braced at his side, eyes fixed on the battleship. "Our deflector shields can't withstand much more of this!"

"Stay on course," the Jedi Master ordered calmly. He glanced down at the controls. "Do you have a cloaking device?"

"This is not a warship!" Captain Panaka snapped, looking angry and betrayed. "We have no weapons, Ambassador! We're a nonviolent people, which is why the Trade Federation was brave enough to attack us in the first place!"

A series of explosions jarred the Nubian, and the lights on the control panel flickered weakly. An alarm sounded, shrill and angry. The transport shuddered, its power drive stalling momentarily in a high-pitched whine.

"No weapons," Qui-Gon Jinn breathed. Obi-Wan was next to him, feeling the weight of the other's gaze as it shifted to find him, steady and unwavering. One hand settled on Ric Olié's shoulder. "The Trade Federation uses pulser tracking for its weapons. Spin the ship. It will make it difficult for them to get a reading on us."

The pilot nodded, flipped a series of levers, and put the Nubian into a slow spin. Ahead, the battleship filled the viewport, then lost focus. The Queen's transport accelerated, racing toward the enemy craft, whipping past towers and gunports, bays and stabilizers, speeding down an alleyway of jagged metal protrusions and cannon fire. A laser bolt hammered into them, causing sparks and smoke to explode from one panel, sending the ship reeling. For a brief moment they were tumbling out of control. Then Ric Olié pulled back hard on the controls, and the hull of the battleship receded.

“Something’s wrong,” the pilot announced quietly, fighting the steering, feeling the ship shudder beneath. “Shields are down!”

They continued to spin, to hug the cavernous shell of the Trade Federation battleship, so close that the larger guns were rendered useless and only the smaller could chance firing at them. But without shields even a glancing hit could be disastrous.

“Sending out the repair crew!” Olié shouted, and flipped a lever.

On the viewscreen, an airlock snapped open, and one by one a series of astromech droids popped out of the hatch and onto the transport’s hull. The transport straightened and leveled out, and the spinning stopped. The droids motored swiftly across the hull, seeking out the damage as Ric Olié hugged the battleship’s shadow in an effort to protect them.

But now there was a new threat. Unable to bring the weapons of their warship to bear in an effective manner, the Trade Federation command dispatched a squad of starfighters. Small, sleek, robot attack ships, they consisted of twin compartments attached to a rounded, swept-back head. As they roared out of the battleship bays, their compartments opened into long slits that exposed their laser guns. Down the length of the mother ship they tore, seeking out the Queen’s transport. Fast and maneuverable, they had no trouble working close to the battleship’s hull. In seconds, they were on top of the transport, weapons firing. Ric Olié struggled to find cover and gain speed. Two of the R2 units were blown away, one on a direct hit, the second when its hold on the transport hull was shattered.

On the viewscreen, the blue R2 unit could be seen working furiously to connect a series of wires exposed by a damaged hull plate. Laser fire lanced all around it, but it continued its effort without stopping. The fourth droid, working close by, disappeared in a cloud of shattered metal and brilliant fire.

Now only the blue unit remained, still busy amid the onslaught of Trade Federation starfighters. Something changed on the cockpit display, and Ric Olié gave a shout of approval. “The shields are up! That little droid did it!” He jammed the thrusters all the way forward, and the transport rocketed away from both the battleship and the starfighters, leaving the Trade Federation blockade and the planet of Naboo behind.

The lone R2 unit turned and motored back into the airlock and disappeared from view.

When they were well away from any Trade Federation presence, Ric Olié made a thorough check of the controls, assessing their damage, trying to determine what was needed. Obi-Wan sat next to him in the copilot’s seat, lending help. Qui-Gon and Captain Panaka stood behind them, awaiting their report. The Queen and the rest of the Naboo had

been secured in other chambers.

Ric Olié shook his head doubtfully. “We can’t go far. The hyperdrive is leaking.”

Qui-Gon Jinn nodded. “We’ll have to land somewhere to make repairs to the ship. What’s out there?”

Ric Olié punched in a star chart, and they hunched over the monitor, studying it.

“Here, Master,” Obi-Wan said, his sharp eyes picking out the only choice that made any sense. “Tatooine. It’s small, poor, and out of the way. It attracts little attention. The Trade Federation has no presence there.”

“How can you be sure?” Captain Panaka asked quickly.

Qui-Gon glanced at him. “It’s controlled by the Hutts.”

Panaka started in alarm. “The Hutts?”

“It’s risky,” Obi-Wan agreed, “but there’s no reasonable alternative.”

Captain Panaka was not convinced. “You can’t take Her Royal Highness there! The Hutts are gangsters and slavers! If they discovered who she was—”

“It would be no different than if we landed on a planet in a system controlled by the Trade Federation,” Qui-Gon interrupted, “except the Hutts aren’t looking for the Queen, which gives us an advantage.”

The Queen’s head of security started to say something more, then thought better of it. He took a deep breath instead, frustration etched on his smooth, dark face, and turned away.

Qui-Gon Jinn tapped Ric Olié on the shoulder. “Set course for Tatooine.”

In a remote conference room on the Trade Federation’s flagship, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako sat side by side at a long table, staring nervously at a hologram of Darth Sidious positioned at the table’s head. The hologram shimmered with the movements of the Sith Lord’s dark cloak, a patchwork of small nuances that the Neimoidians found themselves unable to read.

The Sith Lord had not been summoned. The Neimoidians would have been happy if he had chosen not to communicate with them at all this day. But in keeping with the way he always seemed to sense when things were not going right, he had appeared on his own. Demanding a report on the progress of the invasion, he had settled back to listen to Nute Gunray’s narrative and had said nothing since.

“We control all the cities in the northern and western part of the Naboo territory,” the viceroy was relating, “and we are searching for any other settlements where resistance—”

“Yes, yes,” Darth Sidious interrupted suddenly, his soft voice vaguely impatient. “You’ve done well. Now, then. Destroy all their

high-ranking officials. Do so quietly, but be thorough.” He paused. “What of Queen Amidala? Has she signed the treaty?”

Nute Gunray took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “She has disappeared, my lord. There was an escape—”

“An escape?” The Sith Lord spoke the words in a low hiss.

“One Naboo cruiser got past the blockade—”

“How did she escape, Viceroy?”

Nute Gunray looked at Rune Haako for help, but his counterpart was paralyzed with fear. “The Jedi, my lord. They found their way to her, overpowered her guards ...”

Darth Sidious stirred within his robes like a big cat, shadows glimmering within the confines of his concealing hood. “Viceroy, find her! I want that treaty signed!”

“My lord, we have been unable to locate the ship she escaped on,” the Neimoidian admitted, wishing he could sink into the floor right then and there.

“Viceroy!”

“Once it got by us, we tried to give pursuit, but it managed to elude us! Now it’s out of our range—”

A wave of one robed arm cut him short. “Not for a Sith, it isn’t,” the other whispered.

Something shimmered in the background of the hologram, and a figure emerged from the darkness behind Darth Sidious. Nute Gunray froze. It was a second Sith Lord. But whereas Darth Sidious was a vague and shadowy presence, this new Sith was truly terrifying to look upon. His face was a mask of jagged red and black patterns, the design etched into his skin, and his skull was hairless and studded with a crown of short, hooked horns. Gleaming yellow eyes fixed on the Neimoidians, breaking past their defenses, stripping them bare and dismissing them as insignificant and foolish.

“Viceroy,” Darth Sidious spoke softly in the sudden silence, “this is my apprentice, Lord Maul. He will find your lost ship.”

Nute Gunray inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment, averting his eyes from the frightening presence. “Yes, my lord.”

The hologram shimmered and disappeared, leaving the conference room empty of sound. The Neimoidians sat without moving, without even looking at each other, reptilian eyes fixed on the space the hologram had occupied.

“This is getting out of hand,” Nute Gunray ventured finally, his voice high and tight, thinking that their plans for sabotaging the trade-routes tax did not contemplate risking their lives in the process.

Rune Haako managed a quick nod. “We should not have made this bargain. What will happen when the Jedi become aware that we are doing business with these Sith Lords?”

Nute Gunray, his hands clasped tightly before him, did not care to venture an answer.

Aboard the Queen's transport, the Jedi stood with Captain Panaka and the remaining R2 unit as the captain gave his report to the Queen on the events surrounding their escape through the Trade Federation blockade. Amidala sat surrounded by her three handmaidens, white face framed by the black headdress, dark eyes steady, listening as the captain concluded.

"We are lucky to have this one in our service, Your Highness." Panaka glanced down at the blue-domed astromech droid. "It is an extremely well put together little droid. Without a doubt, it saved the ship back there, not to mention our lives."

Amidala nodded, eyes shifting to the droid. "It is to be commended. What is its number?"

The little blue droid, lights blinking on and off as it processed the conversation, gave a series of small beeps and tweets. Captain Panaka reached down and scraped a large smudge off the droid's metal shell, then straightened.

"Artoo-Detoo, Your Highness."

Queen Amidala leaned forward, and a slender white hand came out to touch the droid's domed casing. "Thank you, Artoo-Detoo. You have proven both loyal and brave." She glanced over her shoulder. "Padmé."

One of her handmaidens came forward. Qui-Gon Jinn, listening to the exchange with half an ear as he considered the problems that lay ahead on Tatooine, noticed it was the young woman who had supported the Queen's decision to escape from Naboo. He frowned. Except, it hadn't been exactly like that ...

"See to the cleaning up of this little droid." The Queen was speaking to the girl. "Artoo-Detoo deserves our gratitude." She turned back to Panaka. "Please continue with your report, Captain."

Panaka glanced uncomfortably at the Jedi Knights. "Your Highness, we are heading for a remote planet called Tatooine." He paused, unwilling to speak further on the matter.

"It is a system far beyond the reach of the Trade Federation." Qui-Gon stepped into the gap smoothly. "Once there, we will be able to make needed repairs to the ship, then to travel on to Coruscant and complete our journey."

"Your Highness," Captain Panaka said quickly, regaining his thoughts on the matter. "Tatooine is very dangerous. It's controlled by the Hutts. The Hutts are gangsters and slavers. I do not agree with the Jedi on their decision to land there."

The Queen looked at Qui-Gon. The Jedi did not waver. "You must

trust my judgment, Your Highness.”

“Must I?” Amidala asked quietly. She shifted her gaze to her handmaidens, ending with Padmé. The girl had not moved from the Queen’s side, but seemed to remember suddenly she had been given a task to complete. She nodded briefly to the Queen, and moved to take R2-D2 in hand.

Amidala looked back at Qui-Gon Jinn. “We are in your hands,” she advised, and the matter was settled.

Jar Jar Binks had been left in the droid storage hold until after the lone R2 unit returned through the airlock and the Naboo came to retrieve it. They didn’t seem to have any orders regarding the Gungan, so they simply left him to his own devices. At first Jar Jar was reluctant to venture out, still thinking of the younger Jedi’s admonishment to stay put and out of trouble. He’d managed one out of two, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to tempt fate.

But in the end his curiosity and restlessness got the better of him. The transport had stopped spinning, the Trade Federation attack had ceased, and the warning alarms had been silenced. Everything was peaceful, and the Gungan saw no reason why he should have to stay shut away in this tiny room for one more minute.

So he cracked the door, stuck his billed face out for a look around, eyestalks swiveling guardedly, saw no one, and made his decision. He left the storage room and wandered along the ship’s corridors—choosing a path that took him away from the cockpit, where the Jedi were likely to be found. He waited for someone to tell him to go back to where he had come from, but no one did, so he began to poke into things, careful what he touched, but unable to help himself sufficiently to forgo all investigation.

He was following a narrow corridor that led up from the lower levels of the transport to the main cabin when he poked his head through an airlock to find one of the Queen’s handmaidens hard at work with an old cloth cleaning the R2 astromech droid.

“Heydey ho!” he called out.

The handmaiden and the R2 unit both started, the girl with a small cry and the droid with a loud beep. Jar Jar jumped in turn, then slowly eased himself through the opening, embarrassed that he had frightened them so badly.

“Me sorry,” he apologized. “Me not mean to scare yous. Okeday?”

The girl smiled. “That’s all right. Come over here.”

Jar Jar came forward a few steps, studying the condition of the droid. “Me find oilcan back dere. Yous need it?”

The girl nodded. “It would help. This little guy is quite a mess.”

Jar Jar scrambled back through the opening, groped about a bit,

found the oilcan he had remembered, and brought it to the girl. "This helps?"

"Thank you," she said, accepting the can. She flipped up the cap and poured some of the oil onto the cloth, then began rubbing the R2 unit's dome.

"Me Jar Jar Binks," Jar Jar said after a few moments, taking a chance on trying to continue the conversation. He liked this Naboo girl.

"I'm Padmé," the girl answered. "I attend Her Highness, Queen Amidala. This is Artoo-Detoo." She rubbed a black smudge from the droid's strut. "You're a Gungan, aren't you?" Jar Jar nodded, long ears flapping against his neck. "How did you end up here with us?"

Jar Jar thought about it a minute. "Me not know exactly. Da day start okeday wit da sunnup. Me munchen clams. Den, boom! Maccaneks every which way, dey flyen, dey scooten ... Me get very scared. Den Jedi runnen, and me grab Quiggon, den maccaneks rollen over, den go down under da lake to Otoh Gunga ta da Boss Nass ..."

He stopped, not knowing where else to go. Padmé was nodding encouragingly. R2-D2 beeped. "Tis 'bout it. Before me know what, pow! Me here!"

He sat back on his haunches and shrugged. "Get very, very scared."

He looked from the girl to the droid. Padmé smiled some more. R2-D2 beeped again. Jar Jar felt pretty good.

In the cockpit, Ric Olié was directing the transport toward a large yellowish planet that was steadily filling up the viewport as they approached its surface. The Jedi and Captain Panaka stood behind him, peering over his shoulder at the ground maps he had punched up on the monitors.

"Tatooine," Obi-Wan Kenobi confirmed, speaking to no one in particular.

Ric Olié pointed to one of the maps on the scopes. "There's a settlement that should have what we need ... a spaceport, it looks like. Mos Espa." He glanced up at the Jedi.

"Land near the city's outskirts," Qui-Gon Jinn ordered. "We don't want to attract attention."

The pilot nodded and began to guide the transport in. It took only moments to direct it down through the planet's atmosphere to a patch of desert just in sight of the city. The Nubian landed in a swirl of dust, settling comfortably in place atop its landing struts. In the distance, Mos Espa glimmered faintly through the shimmer of the midday heat.

Qui-Gon sent his protégé to uncouple the hyperdrive and Captain Panaka to advise the Queen of their landing. He was settled on going into the spaceport alone as he left the cockpit to find other clothing

and came upon Jar Jar Binks, the Queen's handmaiden Padmé, and the little R2 unit.

He slowed, considering the possibility that going into the city alone would make him more noticeable. "Jar Jar," he said finally. "Get ready. You're going with me. The droid as well."

He continued on without looking back. The Gungan stared after him in disbelief, then in horror. By the time he regained his wits, the Jedi was out of view. Wailing in dismay, he chased after him and came upon Obi-Wan in the main cabin hoisting the hyperdrive out of the bowels of the ship.

"Obi-One, sire!" he gasped, throwing himself to his knees in front of the younger Jedi. "Pleeese, me no go wit Quiggon!"

Obi-Wan was inclined to agree, but knew better than to say so. "Sorry, but Qui-Gon is right. This is a multinational spaceport, a trading center. You'll make him appear less obvious by going along." His brow furrowed as he turned back to the hyperdrive. "I hope," he muttered to himself.

Jar Jar climbed to his feet and trudged disconsolately toward R2-D2, his mouth set in a grimace of forbearance. The astromech droid beeped in sympathy, then made a series of encouraging clicks.

Qui-Gon reappeared, dressed now as a farmer in tunic, leggings, and a poncho. He walked past them to where Obi-Wan was studying the hyperdrive. "What have you found?"

Obi-Wan's young face clouded. "The generator is shot. We'll need a new one."

"I thought as much." The Jedi Master knelt next to his protégé. "Well, we can't risk a communication with Coruscant this far out on the edge of the galaxy. It might be intercepted and our position revealed. We'll have to get by on our own." He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "Don't let anyone send a transmission while I'm gone. Be wary, Obi-Wan. I sense a disturbance in the Force."

Obi-Wan's eyes lifted to find his. "I feel it also, Master. I will be careful."

Qui-Gon rose, gathered up Jar Jar and the R2 unit, and headed down the loading ramp to the planet's floor. An empty carpet of sand stretched away in all directions, broken only by massive rock formations and the distant skyline of Mos Espa. The suns that gave the planet life beat down with such ferocity that it seemed as if they were determined to steal that life back again. Heat rose off the sand in a shimmering wave, and the air was so dry it sucked the moisture from their throat and nose passages.

Jar Jar glanced skyward, eyestalks craning, billed amphibious face wrinkling in dismay. "Dis sun gonna do murder ta da skin of dis Gungan," he muttered.

At a signal from Qui-Gon, they began to walk—or, in the case of the R2 unit, to roll. A strange caravan of animals and riders, carts and sleds appeared against the distant skyline like a shadowy mirage, all misshapen and threatening to evaporate in the blink of an eye. Jar Jar muttered some more, but no one was paying attention.

They had not gotten far when a shout brought them around. Two figures were running toward them from the transport. As they neared, Qui-Gon was able to make out Captain Panaka and a girl dressed in rough peasant's garb. He stopped and waited until they caught up, a frown creasing his leonine features.

Panaka was sweating. "Her Highness commands you to take her handmaiden with you. She wishes for Padmé to give her own report of what you might—"

"No more commands from Her Highness today, Captain," Qui-Gon interrupted quickly, shaking his head in refusal. "Mos Espa is not going to be a pleasant place for—"

"The Queen wishes it," Panaka interrupted him right back, his face angry and set. "She is emphatic. She wishes to know more about this planet."

The girl took a step forward. Her dark eyes found Qui-Gon's. "I've been trained in self-defense. I speak a number of languages. I am not afraid. I can take care of myself."

Captain Panaka sighed, looking over his shoulder toward the ship. "Don't make me go back and tell her you refuse."

Qui-Gon hesitated, prepared to do exactly that. Then he looked at Padmé again, saw strength in her eyes, and changed his mind. She might be useful. Traveling with a girl, they might suggest a family in transit and present a less aggressive look.

He nodded. "I don't have time to argue the matter, Captain. I still think this is a bad idea, but she may come." He gave Padmé a look of warning. "Stay close to me."

He started away again, the others trailing. Captain Panaka stood watching with undisguised relief as the strange little procession of Jedi Master, handmaiden, Gungan, and astromech droid moved off into the sweltering landscape toward Mos Espa.



It was not yet midafternoon by the time the members of the little company under Qui-Gon Jinn's command reached Mos Espa and made their way toward the spaceport's center. Mos Espa was large and sprawling and had the look of a gnarled serpent hunkered down in the sand to escape the heat. The buildings were domed and thick-walled and curved to protect against the sun, and the stalls and shops were fronted by awnings and verandas that provided a measure of shade to their vendors. Streets were broad and packed with beings of every shape and size, most from off planet. Some rode the desert-seasoned eopies. Domesticated banthas, massive and horned, and lumbering dewbacks hauled carts, sleds, and wagons that ran on wheels and mechanical tracks by turn, a mishmash of commerce trafficking between Tatooine's smaller ports and the planets of star systems beyond.

Qui-Gon kept a close watch for trouble. There were Rodians and Dugs and others whose purpose was always suspect. Most of those they passed paid them no notice. One or two turned to glance at Jar Jar, but dismissed the Gungan almost out of hand once they got a good look at him. As a group, they blended in nicely. There were so many combinations of creatures of every species that the appearance of one more meant almost nothing.

"Tatooine is home to Jabba the Hutt, who controls the bulk of the trafficking in illegal goods, piracy, and slavery that generates most of the planet's wealth," Qui-Gon was explaining to Padmé. He had been on Tatooine before, though it had been some years ago. "Jabba controls the spaceports and settlements, all of the populated areas. The desert belongs to the Jawas, who scavenge whatever they can find to sell or trade, and to the Tusken, who live a nomadic life and feel free to steal from everyone."

The Jedi kept his voice low and conversational. The girl walked silently at his elbow, her sharp eyes taking in everything. Speeders nosed by them, and droids of every size toiled in the service of desert-garbed aliens.

"There are a number of farms as well, outlying operations that take

advantage of the climate—moisture farms for the most part, operated by off-worlders not a part of the indigenous tribes and scavengers, not connected directly to the Hutts.” His eyes swept the street ahead. “This is a rough and dangerous place. Most avoid it. Its few spaceports have become havens for those who do not wish to be found.”

Padmé glanced up at him. “Like us,” she said.

A pair of domesticated banthas rumbled down the broad avenue, hairy bulks clearing a path for a sled train of quarry blocks and metal struts, horned heads nodding sleepily, padded feet stirring sand and dust in thick clouds with each lumbering step. Their driver dozed atop the foremost sled in the train, small and insignificant in their shadow.

Jar Jar Binks stayed as close as he could manage to the Jedi and the girl, his eyes darting left and right, head swiveling as if it might twist right off his shoulders. Nothing he saw was familiar or welcome. Hard looks followed after him. Sharp eyes measured him for things he would just as soon not think about. Stares were at best challenging and at worst unfriendly. He did not like this place. He wished he were almost anywhere else.

“Tis very bad, dis.” He swallowed against a dryness in his throat that was caused by more than the heat. “Nutten good ‘bout dis place!” He took a careless step and found himself ankle deep in a foul-smelling ooze. “Oh, oh. Tis icky!”

R2-D2 rolled cheerfully along at his side, beeping and chirping in a futile effort at reassuring the Gungan that all was well.

They traveled the main street of the spaceport to its far end and turned down a side street that led to a small plaza ringed with salvage dealers and junk shops. Qui-Gon glanced at the mounds of engine parts, control panels, and communication chips recovered from starships and speeders.

“We’ll try one of these smaller dealers first,” he advised, nodding toward one in which a vast pile of old transports and parts was heaped within an attached compound.

They walked through the shop’s low entry and were greeted by a pudgy blue creature who flew into their faces like a crazed probe, tiny wings buzzing so fast they could barely be seen. “*Hi chubba da nago?*” it snapped in a frizzy, guttural voice, demanding to know their business.

A Toydarian, Qui-Gon thought. He knew enough to recognize one, but not much else. “I need parts for a J-type 327 Nubian,” he advised the other.

The Toydarian fairly beamed with delight, his reticular snout curling over his toothy mouth and making odd smacking noises. “Ah, yes! Nubian! We have lots of that.” The sharp, bulbous eyes flicked from one face to the other, ending with the Gungan. “What’s this?”

Jar Jar shrank behind Qui-Gon fearfully. "Never mind that." The Jedi brushed the Toydarian's question aside. "Can you help us or not?"

"Can you pay me or not—that's the question!" The skinny blue arms crossed defiantly over the rounded torso as the Toydarian regarded them with disdain. "What kinda junk you after, farmer?"

"My droid has a readout of what I need," Qui-Gon advised the other with a glance down at the R2 unit.

Still hanging midair in front of Qui-Gon's nose, the Toydarian glanced over one shoulder. "*Peedunkel! Naba dee unko!*"

A small, disheveled boy raced in from the salvage yard, coming to an uncertain stop in front of them. His clothes were ragged and thick with grime, and he had the look of someone about to be given a beating. He flinched as the Toydarian wheeled back and lifted a hand in admonishment.

"What took you so long?"

"*Mel tass cho-pas kee,*" the boy responded quickly, blue eyes taking in the newcomers with a quick glance. "I was cleaning out the bin like you—"

"*Chut-chut!*" The Toydarian threw up his hands angrily. "Never mind the bin! Watch the store! I've got some selling to do!"

He flitted back around to face his customers. "So, let me take you out back. You'll soon find what you need."

He darted toward the salvage yard, beckoning Qui-Gon eagerly. The Jedi followed, with R2-D2 trundling after. Jar Jar moved to a shelf and picked up an odd-looking bit of metal, intrigued by its shape, wondering what it was.

"Don't touch anything," Qui-Gon called over his shoulder, his tone of voice sharp.

Jar Jar put the item down and made a face at Qui-Gon's departing back, sticking out his long tongue in defiance. When the Jedi was out of sight, he picked up the part again.

Anakin Skywalker could not take his eyes off the girl. He noticed her the moment he entered Watto's shop, even before Watto said anything, and he hadn't been able to stop looking at her since. He barely heard what Watto said to him about watching the shop. He barely noticed the strange-looking creature that had come in with her and was poking around in the shelves and bins. Even after she noticed he was staring at her, he could not help himself.

He moved now to an open space on the counter, hoisted himself up, and sat watching her while pretending to clean a transmitter cell. She was looking back at him now, embarrassment turning to curiosity. She was small and slender with long, braided brown hair, brown eyes, and

a face he found so beautiful that he had nothing to which he could compare it. She was dressed in rough peasant's clothing, but she seemed very self-possessed.

She gave him an amused smile, and he felt himself melting in confusion and wonder. He took a deep breath. "Are you an angel?" he asked quietly.

The girl stared. "What?"

"An angel." Anakin straightened a bit. "They live on the moons of Iego, I think. They are the most beautiful creatures in the universe. They are good and kind, and so pretty they make even the most hardened space pirates cry like small children."

She gave him a confused look. "I've never heard of angels," she said.

"You must be one of them," Anakin insisted. "Maybe you just don't know it."

"You're a funny little boy." The amused smile returned. "How do you know so much?"

Anakin smiled back and shrugged. "I listen to all the traders and pilots who come through here." He glanced toward the salvage yard. "I'm a pilot, you know. Someday, I'm going to fly away from this place."

The girl wandered to one end of the counter, looked away, then back again. "Have you been here long?"

"Since I was very little—three, I think. My mom and I were sold to Gardulla the Hutt, but she lost us to Watto, betting on the Podraces. Watto's a lot better master, I think."

She stared at him in shock. "You're a slave?"

The way she said it made Anakin feel ashamed and angry. He glared at her defiantly. "I am a person!"

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, looking upset and embarrassed. "I don't fully understand, I guess. This is a strange world to me."

He studied her intently for a moment, thinking of other things, wanting to tell her of them. "You are a strange girl to me," he said instead. He swung his legs out from the counter. "My name is Anakin Skywalker."

She brushed at her hair. "Padmé Naberrie."

The strange creature she had come in with wandered back to the front of the shop and bent over a stout little droid body with a bulbous nose. Reaching up curiously, it pushed at the nose with one finger. Instantly armatures popped out from every direction, metal limbs swinging into place. The droid's motors whizzed and whirled, and it jerked to life and began moving forward. Padmé's odd companion went after it with a moan of dismay, grabbing on in an effort to slow it down, but the droid continued marching through the

shop, knocking over everything it came in contact with.

“Hit the nose!” Anakin called out, unable to keep himself from laughing.

The creature did as it was told, pounding the droid’s nose wildly. The droid stopped at once, the arms and legs retracted, the motors shut down, and the droid went still. Both Anakin and Padmé were laughing now, and their laughter increased as they saw the look on the unfortunate creature’s long-billed face.

Anakin looked at Padmé and the girl at him. Their laughter died away. The girl reached up to touch her hair self-consciously, but she did not divert her gaze.

“I’m going to marry you,” the boy said suddenly.

There was a moment of silence, and she began laughing again, a sweet musical sound he didn’t mind at all. The creature who accompanied her rolled his eyes.

“I mean it,” he insisted.

“You are an odd one,” she said, her laughter dying away. “Why do you say that?”

He hesitated. “I guess because it’s what I believe ...”

Her smile was dazzling. “Well, I’m afraid I can’t marry you ...” She paused, searching his memory for his name.

“Anakin,” he said.

“Anakin.” She cocked her head. “You’re just a little boy.”

His gaze was intense as he faced her. “I won’t always be,” he said quietly.



In the salvage yard, Watto was studying the screen of a portable memory bank he held in one hand, tracing through his inventory record. Qui-Gon, arms folded into his farmer’s poncho, stood waiting patiently, the R2 unit at his side.

“Ah, here it is. A T-14 hyperdrive generator!” The Toydarian’s wings beat wildly as he hovered before the Jedi, his gnarled finger jabbing at the viewscreen. “You’re in luck. I’m the only one hereabouts who has one. But you might as well buy a new ship. It would be cheaper. Speaking of which, how’re you going to pay for all this, farmer?”

Qui-Gon considered. “I have twenty thousand Republic dataries to put toward—”

“Republic credits?” Watto exploded in disgust. “Republic credits are no good out here! I need something better than that, something of value ...”

The Jedi Master shook his head. “I don’t have anything else.” One hand came up, passing casually in front of the Toydarian’s face. “But

credits will do fine.”

“No, they won’t!” Watto snapped, buzzing angrily.

Qui-Gon frowned, then passed his hand in front of the pudgy blue alien again, bringing the full force of his Jedi suggestive power to bear. “Credits will do fine,” he repeated.

Watto sneered. “No, they won’t!” he repeated. “What do you think you’re doing, waving your hand around like that? You think you’re some kinda Jedi? Hah! I’m a Toydarian! Mind tricks don’t work on me—only money! No money, no parts, no deal! And no one else has a T-14 hyperdrive generator, I can promise you that!”

Chagrined, Qui-Gon wheeled back for the shop, the R2 unit following at his heels. The Toydarian shouted after them to come back when they had something worthwhile to trade, still scolding the Jedi Master for trying to foist Republic credits on him. Qui-Gon reentered the shop just as Jar Jar pulled a part from a large stack and sent the entire arrangement tumbling to the floor. His efforts at correcting the problem brought a second display crashing down as well.

The boy and the Queen’s handmaiden were deep in discussion, paying no attention to the Gungan.

“We’re leaving,” Qui-Gon announced to the girl, moving toward the shop’s entry, the R2 unit trundling along behind.

Jar Jar was quick to follow, anxious to escape his latest mess. Padmé gave the boy a warm smile. “I’m glad I met you, Anakin,” she said, turning after them.

“I’m glad I met you, too,” he called after, a reluctance evident in his voice.

Watto flew in from the salvage yard, shaking his head in disgust. “Outlanders! They think because we live so far from everything, we know nothing!”

Anakin was still staring longingly after Padmé, his gaze fixed on the empty doorway. “They seemed nice enough to me.”

Watto snorted and flew into his face. “Clean up this mess, then you can go home!”

Anakin brightened, gave a small cheer, and went quickly to work.

Qui-Gon led his companions back through the little plaza of salvage shops toward the main avenue. At a place where two buildings divided to form a shadowed niche, the Jedi Master moved everyone from view and brought out his comlink from beneath his poncho. Padmé and the R2 unit stood waiting patiently, but Jar Jar prowled the space as if trapped, eyes fixed nervously on the busy street.

When Obi-Wan responded to the comlink’s pulse, Qui-Gon quickly filled him in on the situation. “Are you sure there isn’t anything of value left on board?” he concluded.

There was a pause at the other end. "A few containers of supplies, the Queen's wardrobe, some jewelry maybe. Not enough for you to barter with. Not in the amounts you're talking about."

"All right," Qui-Gon responded with a frown. "Another solution will present itself. I'll check back."

He tucked the comlink beneath his poncho and signaled to the others. He was moving toward the street again when Jar Jar grabbed his arm.

"Noah gain, sire," the Gungan pleaded. "Da beings hereabouts crazy nuts. We goen be robbed and crunched!"

"Not likely," Qui-Gon replied with a sigh, freeing himself. "We have nothing of value. That's our problem."

They started back down the street, Qui-Gon trying to think what to do next. Padmé and R2-D2 stayed close as they made their way through the crowds, but Jar Jar began to lag behind, distracted by all the strange sights and smells. They were passing an outdoor café, its tables occupied by a rough-looking bunch of aliens, among them a Dug who was holding forth on the merits of Podracing. Jar Jar hurried to catch up to his companions, but then caught sight of a string of frogs hanging from a wire in front of a nearby stall. The Gungan slowed, his mouth watering. He had not eaten in some time. He glanced around to see if anyone was looking, then unfurled his long tongue and snapped up one of the frogs. The frog disappeared into Jar Jar's mouth in the blink of an eye.

Unfortunately, the frog was still securely tied to the wire. Jar Jar stood there, the wire hanging out of his mouth, unable to move.

The vendor in charge of the stall rushed out. "Hey, that will be seven truguts!"

Jar Jar glanced frantically down the street for his companions, but they were already out of sight. In desperation, he let go of the frog. The frog popped out of his mouth as if catapulted, winging away at the end of the taut wire. It ricocheted this way and that, breaking free at last to land directly in the Dug's soup, splashing gooey liquid all over him.

The gangly Dug leapt to his feet in fury, catching sight of the hapless Jar Jar as he tried to move away from the frog vendor. Springing across the table on all fours, he was on top of the Gungan in an instant, grabbing him by the throat.

"*Chubba!* You!" the Dug snarled through its corded snout. Feelers and mandibles writhed. "Is this yours?"

The Dug shoved the frog in the Gungan's face threateningly. Jar Jar could not get any words out, gasping for breath, fighting to break free. His eyes rolled wildly as he looked for help that wasn't there. Other creatures pushed forward to surround him, Rodians among them. The

Dug threw Jar Jar to the ground, shouting at him, hovering over him in a crouch. Desperately, the Gungan tried to scramble to safety.

"No, no," he moaned plaintively as he sought an avenue of escape. "Why me always da one?"

"Because you're afraid," a voice answered calmly.

Anakin Skywalker pushed his way through the crowd, coming up to stand next to the Dug. The boy seemed unafraid of the creature, undeterred by the hard-eyed crowd, his bearing self-assured. He gave the Dug an appraising look. "*Chess ko, Sebulba*," he said. "Careful. This one's very well connected."

Sebulba turned to face the boy, cruel face twisting with disdain as he caught sight of the newcomer. "*Tooney rana dunko, shag?*" he snapped, demanding to know what the boy meant.

Anakin shrugged. "Connected—as in Hutt." The blue eyes fixed the Dug and saw a hint of fear in the other's face. "Big-time connected, this one, Sebulba. I'd hate to see you diced before we had a chance to race again."

The Dug spit in fury. "*Neek me chawa!* Next time we race, *vermo*, it will be the end of you!" He gestured violently. "*Uto notu wo shag!* If you weren't a slave, I'd squash you here and now!"

With a final glare at the cringing Jar Jar, Sebulba wheeled away, taking his companions with him, back to their tables and their food and drink. Anakin stared after the Dug. "Yeah, it'd be a pity if you had to pay for me," he said softly.

He was helping Jar Jar back to his feet when Qui-Gon, Padmé, and R2-D2, having finally missed the Gungan, reappeared hurriedly through the crowd.

"Hi!" he greeted cheerfully, happy to see Padmé again so soon. "Your buddy here was about to be turned into orange goo. He picked a fight with a Dug. An especially dangerous Dug."

"Nossir, nossir!" the chagrined Gungan insisted, brushing off dust and sand. "Me hate crunchen. Tis da last thing me want!"

Qui-Gon gave Jar Jar a careful once-over, glanced around at the crowd, and took the Gungan by the arm. "Nevertheless, the boy saved you from a beating. You have a penchant for finding trouble, Jar Jar." He gave Anakin a short nod. "Thank you, my young friend."

Padmé gave Anakin a warm smile as well, and the boy felt himself blush with pride.

"Me doen nutten!" Jar Jar insisted, still trying to defend himself, hands gesturing for emphasis.

"You were afraid," the boy told him, looking up at the long-billed face solemnly. "Fear attracts the fearful. Sebulba was trying to overcome his fear by squashing you." He cocked his head at the Gungan. "You can help yourself by being less afraid."

“And that works for you?” Padmé asked skeptically, giving him a wry look.

Anakin smiled and shrugged. “Well ... up to a point.”

Anxious to spend as much time as possible with the girl, he persuaded the group to follow him a short distance down the street to a fruit stand, a ramshackle affair formed by a makeshift ragged awning stretched over a framework of bent poles. Boxes of brightly colored fruit were arranged on a rack tilted toward the street for viewing. A weathered old lady, gray-haired and stooped, her simple clothing patched and worn, rose from a stool to greet them on their approach.

“How are you feeling today, Jira?” Anakin asked her, giving her a quick hug.

The old lady smiled. “The heat’s never been kind to me, you know, Annie.”

“Guess what?” the boy replied quickly, beaming. “I’ve found that cooling unit I’ve been searching for. It’s pretty beat up, but I’ll have it fixed up for you in no time, I promise. That should help.”

Jira reached out to brush his pink cheek with her wrinkled hand, her smile broadening. “You’re a fine boy, Annie.”

Anakin shrugged off the compliment and began scanning the fruit display. “I’ll take four pallies, Jira.” He glanced at Padmé eagerly. “You’ll like these.”

He reached into his pocket for the truguts he had been saving, but when he brought them out to pay Jira, he dropped one. The farmer, standing next to him, bent to retrieve it. As he did, his poncho opened just far enough that the boy caught sight of the lightsaber hanging from the belt about his waist.

The boy’s eyes went wide, but he masked his surprise by focusing on the coins. He only had three, he found. “Whoops, I thought I had more,” he said quickly, not looking up. “Make that three pallies, Jira. I’m not that hungry anyway.”

The old woman gave Qui-Gon, Padmé, and Jar Jar their pallies and took the coins from Anakin. A gust of wind whipped down the street, rattling the framework of poles and causing the awning to billow. A second gust sent dust swirling in all directions.

Jira rubbed her arms with her gnarled hands. “Gracious, my bones are aching. There’s a storm coming, Annie. You’d better get home quick.”

The wind gusted in a series of sharp blasts that sent sand and loose debris flying. Anakin glanced at the sky, then at Qui-Gon. “Do you have shelter?” he asked.

The Jedi Master nodded. “We’ll head back to our ship. Thank you again, my young friend, for—”

“Is your ship far?” the boy interrupted hurriedly. All around them, shopkeepers and vendors were closing and shuttering windows and doors, carrying goods and wares inside, wrapping coverings over displays and boxes.

“It’s on the city’s outskirts,” Padmé answered, turning away from the stinging gusts of sand.

Anakin took her hand quickly, tugging on it. “You’ll never reach the outskirts in time. Sandstorms are very, very dangerous. Come with me. You can wait it out at my home. It’s not far. My mom won’t mind. Hurry!”

With the wind howling all about them and the air clouded with sand, Anakin Skywalker shouted good-bye to Jira and led his newly adopted charges down the street in a rush.

On the outskirts of Mos Espa, Obi-Wan Kenobi stood near the nose of the Nubian as the wind gathered force, whipping at his robe, tearing across the broad expanse of the Tatooine desert. His troubled eyes looked off into the distance where Mos Espa was beginning to disappear behind a curtain of sand. He turned as Captain Panaka came down the ramp of the transport to join him.

“This storm’s going to slow them down,” the Jedi observed worriedly.

Panaka nodded. “It looks pretty bad. We’d better seal up the ship before it gets any worse.”

There was a beep from the soldier’s comlink. Panaka retrieved the communicator from his belt. “Yes?”

Ric Olié’s voice rose from the speaker. “We’re receiving a message from home.”

Panaka and Obi-Wan exchanged glances. “We’ll be right there,” the captain advised.

They went up the ramp quickly, sealing it behind them. The transmission had been received in the Queen’s chambers. At Ric Olié’s direction, they found Amidala and her handmaidens Eirtaé and Rabé viewing a hologram of Sio Bibble that was shimmering weakly at one end of the room, the governor’s voice breaking up in transmission.

“... cut off all our food supplies until you return ... death toll rising, catastrophic ... must bow to their wishes, Your Highness ...” Sio Bibble’s image and voice faded and returned, garbled still. “Please, I beg of you, tell us what to do! If you can hear me, Your Highness, you must contact me ...”

The transmission flickered and disappeared. The governor’s voice faded into silence. Queen Amidala sat staring at the empty space it left behind, her smooth face troubled. Her hands worked quietly in her lap, betraying a nervousness she could not quite manage to hide.

Her gaze shifted to Obi-Wan. The Jedi shook his head quickly. "It is a trick. Send no reply, Your Highness. Send no transmission of any kind."

The Queen stared at him uncertainly for a moment, then nodded in acquiescence. Obi-Wan left her chambers without further comment, hoping fervently he had made the right decision.

The sandstorm raged through the streets of Mos Espa in a blinding, choking whirlwind that tore at clothes and exposed skin with relentless force. Anakin held Padmé's hand so as not to lose her, the farmer, the amphibious creature, and the R2 unit trailing behind, fighting to reach his home in the city's slave quarters while there was still time. Other residents and visitors struggled past, engaged in a similar pursuit, heads lowered, faces covered, bodies bent over as if weighted by age. Somewhere in the distance, an eopie bawled in fright. The light turned an odd yellowish gray, obscured by sand and grit, and the buildings of the city disappeared in a deep, impenetrable haze.

Even as he fought his way through the storm, Anakin's thoughts were directed elsewhere. He was thinking of Padmé, of having the chance to take her home to meet his mother, of being able to show her his projects, of holding her hand some more. It sent a flush through him that was both warm and kind of scary. It made him feel good about himself. He was thinking of the farmer, too—if that's what he was, which Anakin was pretty sure he wasn't. He carried a lightsaber, and only Jedi carried lightsabers. It was almost too much to hope for, that a real Jedi might be going to his home, to visit him. But Anakin's instincts told him he was not mistaken, and that something mysterious and exciting had brought this little group to him.

He was thinking, finally, of his dreams and his hopes for himself and his mother, thinking that maybe something wonderful would come out of this unexpected encounter, something that would change his life forever.

They reached the slave quarters, a jumbled collection of hovels stacked one on top of the other so that they resembled anthills, each complex linked by common walls and switchback stairways, the plaza fronting them almost empty as the sandstorm chased everyone under cover. Anakin led his charges through the gritty gloom to his front door and pushed his way inside.

"Mom! Mom! I'm home!" he called excitedly.

Adobe walls, whitewashed and scrubbed, glimmered softly in a mix

of storm-clouded sunlight admitted through small, arched windows and a diffuse electric glow from ceiling fixtures. They stood in the main room, a smallish space dominated by a table and chairs. A kitchen occupied one wall and a work space another. Openings led to smaller nooks and sleeping rooms.

Outside, the wind howled past the doors and windows, shaving a fresh layer of skin from the exterior of the walls.

Jar Jar Binks looked around with a mix of curiosity and relief. "Tis cozy," he murmured.

Anakin's mother entered from a work area off to one side, brushing her hands on her dress. She was a woman of forty, her long brown hair tied back from her worn face, her clothing rough and simple. She had been pretty once, and Anakin would say she was pretty still, but time and the demands of her life were catching up with her. Her smile was warm and youthful as she greeted her son, but it faded quickly as she caught sight of the people behind him.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed softly, glancing uncertainly from face to face. "Annie, what's this?"

Anakin beamed. "These are my friends, Mom." He smiled at Padmé. "This is Padmé Naberrie. And this is—" He stopped. "Gee, I guess I don't know any of your names," he admitted.

Qui-Gon stepped forward. "I'm Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is Jar Jar Binks." He indicated the Gungan, who made a sort of fluttering gesture with his hands.

The R2 unit made a small beep.

"And our droid, Artoo-Detoo," Padmé finished.

"I'm building a droid," Anakin announced quickly, anxious to show Padmé his project. "You wanna see?"

"Anakin!" His mother's voice stopped him in his tracks. Resolve tightened her features. "Anakin, why are they here?"

He looked at her, confused. "There's a sandstorm, Mom. Listen."

She glanced at the door, then out the windows. The wind howled past, a river of sand and grit.

"Your son was kind enough to offer us shelter," Qui-Gon explained. "We met at the shop where he works."

"Come on!" Anakin insisted, grabbing Padmé's hand once more. "Let me show you my droid."

He led Padmé toward his bedroom, already beginning a detailed explanation of what he was doing. The girl followed without arguing, listening attentively. R2-D2 went with them, beeping in response to the boy's words.

Jar Jar stayed where he was, still looking around, appearing to want someone to tell him what to do. Qui-Gon stood facing the boy's mother in awkward silence. Grains of sand beat against the thick glass

of the windows with a rapid pocking sound.

"I'm Shmi Skywalker," she said, holding out her hand. "Anakin and I are pleased to have you as our guests."

Qui-Gon had already appraised the situation and determined what was needed. He reached under his poncho and pulled five small capsules from a pouch in his belt. "I know this is unexpected. Take these. There's enough food for a meal."

She accepted the capsules. "Thank you." Her eyes lifted and lowered again. "Thank you very much. I'm sorry if I was abrupt. I'll never get used to Anakin's surprises, I guess."

"He's a very special boy," Qui-Gon offered.

Shmi's eyes lifted again, and the look she gave him suggested they shared an important secret.

"Yes," she said softly, "I know."

In his bedroom, Anakin was showing Padmé C-3PO. The droid lay on his workbench, deactivated at the moment because the boy was in the process of fabricating its metal skin. He had completed the internal wiring, but its torso, arms, and legs were still bare of any covering. One eye was out of its head as well, lying nearby where he had left it after tightening down the visual refractor the night before.

Padmé bent over his shoulder, studying the droid carefully.

"Isn't he great?" Anakin asked eagerly, anxious for her reaction. "He's not finished yet, but he will be soon."

"He's wonderful," the girl answered, genuinely impressed.

The boy flushed with pride. "You really like him? He's a protocol droid ... to help Mom. Watch!"

He activated C-3PO with a flip of its power switch, and the droid sat up at once. Anakin rushed around hurriedly, searching, then snatched up the missing eye from his workbench and snapped it into its proper socket.

C-3PO looked at them. "How do you do? I am a protocol droid trained in and adept at cyborg relatives ... customs and humans ..."

"Ooops," Anakin said quickly. "He's a little confused."

He snatched up a long-handled tool with an electronic designator and fitted it carefully to a port in C-3PO's head, then ratcheted the handle several turns, studying the setting as he did so. When he had it where he wanted, he pushed a button on the handle. C-3PO jerked several times in response. When Anakin removed the designator, the droid stood up from the workbench and faced Padmé.

"How do you do? I am See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations. How may I serve you?"

Anakin shrugged. "I just named him the other day, but I forgot to enter the code in his memory banks so he could tell you himself."

Padmé grinned at Anakin, delighted. "He's perfect!"

R2-D2 sidled up to them and emitted a sharp flurry of beeps and whistles.

C-3PO glanced down curiously. "I beg your pardon ... what do you mean, I'm naked?"

R2-D2 beeped some more.

"Goodness! How embarrassing!" C-3PO glanced quickly over his skeletal limbs. "My parts are showing? My goodness!"

Anakin pursed his lips. "Sort of. But don't worry, I'll fix that soon enough." He eased the droid back toward the workbench, glancing over his shoulder at Padmé. "When the storm is over, you can see my racer. I'm building a Podracer. But Watto doesn't know about it. It's a secret."

Padmé smiled. "That's okay. I'm very good at keeping secrets."

The storm continued throughout the remainder of the day, engulfing Mos Espa, sand blown in from the desert piling up against the shuttered buildings, forming ramps against doorways and walls, clouding the air, and shutting out the light. Shmi Skywalker used the food capsules Qui-Gon had given her to prepare dinner for them. As she worked on their meal and while Padmé was occupied with Anakin in the other room, Qui-Gon moved off alone into one corner and surreptitiously contacted Obi-Wan on the comlink. The connection was less than perfect, but they were able to communicate sufficiently for the Jedi Master to learn of the transmission from Naboo.

"You made the right choice, Obi-Wan," he assured his young protégé, keeping his voice low.

"The Queen is very upset," the other advised, his response crackling through the storm.

Qui-Gon glanced over to where Shmi was standing at the cook surface, her back turned. "That transmission was bait to establish a trace. I'm certain of it."

"But what if Governor Bibble is telling the truth and the Naboo are dying?"

Qui-Gon sighed. "Either way, we're running out of time," he advised quietly, and ended the transmission.

They sat down to eat Shmi's dinner a short while after, the storm still howling without, an eerie backdrop of sound against the silence within. Qui-Gon and Padmé occupied the ends of the table, while Anakin, Jar Jar, and Shmi sat at its sides. Anakin, in the way of small boys, began talking about life as a slave, in no way embarrassed to be doing so, thinking of it only as a fact of his life and anxious to share himself with his new friends. Shmi, more protective of her son's station, was making an effort to help their guests appreciate the

severity of their situation.

"All slaves have transmitters placed inside their bodies," Shmi was explaining.

"I've been working on a scanner to try to locate them, but so far no luck," Anakin said solemnly.

Shmi smiled. "Any attempt at escape ..."

"... and they blow you up!" the boy finished. "Poof!"

Jar Jar had been slurping contentedly at his soup, listening with half an ear as he devoured the very tasty broth. He overdid it on hearing this, however, making such a loud noise that he stopped conversation altogether. All eyes turned on him momentarily. He lowered his head in embarrassment and pretended not to see.

Padmé looked back at Shmi. "I can't believe slavery is still permitted in the galaxy. The Republic's antislavery laws should—"

"The Republic doesn't exist out here," Shmi interrupted quickly, her voice hard. "We must survive on our own."

There was an awkward silence as Padmé looked away, not knowing what else to say.

"Have you ever seen a Podrace?" Anakin asked, trying to ease her discomfort.

Padmé shook her head no. She glanced at Shmi, noting the sudden concern on the woman's lined face. Jar Jar launched his tongue at a morsel of food nestled deep in a serving bowl at the far end of the table, deftly plucking it out, drawing it in, swallowing it, and smacking his lips in satisfaction. A disapproving look from Qui-Gon quickly silenced him.

"They have Podracing on Malastare," the Jedi Master observed. "Very fast, very dangerous."

Anakin grinned. "I'm the only human who can do it!" A sharp glance from his mother wiped the grin from his face. "Mom, what? I'm not bragging. It's true! Watto says he's never heard of a human doing it."

Qui-Gon studied him carefully. "You must have Jedi reflexes if you race Pods."

Anakin smiled broadly at the compliment. Jar Jar's tongue snaked toward the serving bowl in an effort to snare another morsel, but this time Qui-Gon was waiting. His hand moved swiftly, and in a heartbeat he had secured the Gungan's tongue between his thumb and forefinger. Jar Jar froze, his mouth open, his tongue held fast, his eyes wide.

"Don't do that again," Qui-Gon advised, an edge to his soft voice.

Jar Jar tried to say something, but it came out an unintelligible mumble. Qui-Gon released the Gungan's tongue, and it snapped back into place. Jar Jar massaged his billed mouth ruefully.

Anakin's young face lifted to the older man's, and his voice was hesitant. "I ... I was wondering something."

Qui-Gon nodded for him to continue.

The boy cleared his throat, screwing up his courage. "You're a Jedi Knight, aren't you?"

There was a long moment of silence as the man and the boy stared at each other. "What makes you think that?" Qui-Gon asked finally.

Anakin swallowed. "I saw your lightsaber. Only Jedi Knights carry that kind of weapon."

Qui-Gon continued to stare at him, then leaned back slowly in his chair and smiled. "Perhaps I killed a Jedi and stole it from him."

Anakin shook his head quickly. "I don't think so. No one can kill a Jedi."

Qui-Gon's smile faded and there was a hint of sadness in his dark eyes. "I wish that were so ..."

"I had a dream I was a Jedi," the boy said quickly, anxious to talk about it now. "I came back here and freed all the slaves. I dreamed it just the other night, when I was out in the desert." He paused, his young face expectant. "Have you come to free us?"

Qui-Gon Jinn shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not ..." He trailed off, hesitating.

"I think you have," the boy insisted, defiance in his eyes. "Why else would you be here?"

Shmi was about to say something, to chastise her son for his impudence perhaps, but Qui-Gon spoke first, leaning forward conspiratorially. "I can see there's no fooling you, Anakin. But you mustn't let anyone know about us. We're on our way to Coruscant, the central system in the Republic, on a very important mission. It must be kept secret."

Anakin's eyes widened. "Coruscant? Wow! How did you end up out here in the Outer Rim?"

"Our ship was damaged," Padmé answered him. "We're stranded here until we can repair it."

"I can help!" the boy announced quickly, anxious to be of service to them. "I can fix anything!"

Qui-Gon smiled at his enthusiasm. "I believe you can, but our first task, as you know from our visit to Watto's shop, is to acquire the parts we need."

"Wit nutten ta trade," Jar Jar pointed out sourly.

Padmé was looking at Qui-Gon speculatively. "These junk dealers must have a weakness of some kind."

"Gambling," Shmi said at once. She rose and began clearing the table of dishes. "Everything in Mos Espa revolves around betting on those awful Podraces."

Qui-Gon rose, walked to the window, and stared out through the thick, diffuse glass at the clouds of windblown sand. "Podracing," he mused. "Greed can be a powerful ally, if it's used properly."

Anakin leapt to his feet. "I've built a racer!" he declared triumphantly. His boy's face shone with pride. "It's the fastest ever! There's a big race day after tomorrow, on Boonta Eve. You could enter my Pod! It's all but finished—"

"Anakin, settle down!" his mother said sharply, cutting him short. Her eyes were bright with concern. "Watto won't let you race!"

"Watto doesn't have to know the racer is mine!" the boy replied quickly, his mind working through the problem. He turned back to Qui-Gon. "You could make him think it was yours! You could get him to let me pilot it for you!"

The Jedi Master had caught the look in Shmi's eyes. He met her gaze, silently acknowledged her consternation, and waited patiently for her response.

"I don't want you to race, Annie," his mother said quietly. She shook her head to emphasize her words, weariness and concern reflected in her eyes. "It's awful. I die every time Watto makes you do it. Every time."

Anakin bit his lip. "But, Mom, I love it!" He gestured at Qui-Gon. "And they need my help. They're in trouble. The prize money would more than pay for the parts they need."

Jar Jar Binks nodded in support. "We in kinda bad goo."

Qui-Gon walked over to Anakin and looked down at him. "Your mother's right. Let's drop the matter." He held the boy's gaze for a moment, then turned back to his mother. "Do you know of anyone friendly to the Republic who might be able to help us?"

Shmi stood silent and unmoving as she thought the matter through. She shook her head no.

"We have to help them, Mom," Anakin insisted, knowing he was right about this, that he was meant to help the Jedi and his companions. "Remember what you said? You said the biggest problem in the universe is that no one helps anyone."

Shmi sighed. "Anakin, don't—"

"But you said it, Mom." The boy refused to back down, his eyes locked on hers.

Shmi Skywalker made no response this time, her brow furrowed, her body still.

"I'm sure Qui-Gon doesn't want to put your son in danger," Padmé said suddenly, uncomfortable with the confrontation they had brought about between mother and son, trying to ease the tension. "We will find another way ..."

Shmi looked over at the girl and shook her head slowly. "No,

Annie's right. There is no other way. I may not like it, but he can help you." She paused. "Maybe he was meant to help you."

She said it as if coming to a conclusion that had eluded her until now, as if discovering a truth that, while painful, was obvious.

Anakin's face lit up. "Is that a yes?" He clapped his hands in glee. "That is a yes!"

Night blanketed the vast cityscape of Coruscant, cloaking the endless horizon of gleaming spires in deep velvet layers. Lights blazed from windows, bright pinpricks against the black. As far as the eye could see, as far as a being could travel, the city's buildings jutted from the planet's surface in needles of steel alloy and reflective glass. Long ago, the city had consumed the planet with its bulk, and now there was only the city, the center of the galaxy, the heartbeat of the Republic's rule.

A rule that some were intending to end once and for all. A rule that some despised.

Darth Sidious stood high on a balcony overlooking Coruscant, his concealing black robes making him appear as if he were a creature produced by the night. He stood facing the city, his eyes directed at its lights, at the faint movement of its air traffic, disinterested in his apprentice, Darth Maul, who waited to one side.

His thoughts were of the Sith and of the history of their order.

The Sith had come into being almost two thousand years ago. They were a cult given over to the dark side of the Force, embracing fully the concept that power denied was power wasted. A rogue Jedi Knight had founded the Sith, a singular dissident in an order of harmonious followers, a rebel who understood from the beginning that the real power of the Force lay not in the light, but in the dark. Failing to gain approval for his beliefs from the Council, he had broken with the order, departing with his knowledge and his skills, swearing in secret that he could bring down those who had dismissed him.

He was alone at first, but others from the Jedi order who believed as he did and who had followed him in his study of the dark side soon came over. Others were recruited, and soon the ranks of the Sith swelled to more than fifty in number. Disdaining the concepts of cooperation and consensus, relying on the belief that acquisition of power in any form lends strength and yields control, the Sith began to build their cult in opposition to the Jedi. Theirs was not an order created to serve; theirs was an order created to dominate.

Their war with the Jedi was vengeful and furious and ultimately doomed. The rogue Jedi who had founded the Sith order was its nominal leader, but his ambition excluded any sharing of power. His disciples began to conspire against him and each other almost from

the beginning, so that the war they instigated was as much with each other as with the Jedi.

In the end, the Sith destroyed themselves. They destroyed their leader first, then each other. What few survived the initial bloodbath were quickly dispatched by watchful Jedi. In a matter of only weeks, all of them died.

All but one.

Darth Maul shifted impatiently. The younger Sith had not yet learned his Master's patience; that would come with time and training. It was patience that had saved the Sith order in the end. It was patience that would give them their victory now over the Jedi.

The Sith who had survived when all of his fellows had died had understood that. He had adopted patience as a virtue when the others had forsaken it. He had adopted cunning, stealth, and subterfuge as the foundation of his way—old Jedi virtues the others had disdained. He stood aside while the Sith tore at each other like kriks and were destroyed. When the carnage was complete, he went into hiding, biding his time, waiting for his chance.

When it was believed all of the Sith were destroyed, he emerged from his concealment. At first he worked alone, but he was growing old and he was the last of his kind. Eventually, he went out in search of an apprentice. Finding one, he trained him to be a Master in his turn, then to find his own apprentice, and so to carry on their work. But there would only be two at any one time. There would be no repetition of the mistakes of the old order, no struggle between Siths warring for power within the cult. Their common enemy was the Jedi, not each other. It was for their war with the Jedi they must save themselves.

The Sith who reinvented the order called himself Darth Bane.

A thousand years had passed since the Sith were believed destroyed, and the time they had waited for had come at last.

"Tatooine is sparsely populated." His student's rough voice broke into his thoughts, and Darth Sidious lifted his eyes to the hologram. "The Hutts rule. The Republic has no presence. If the trace was correct, Master, I will find them quickly and without hindrance."

The yellow eyes glimmered with excitement and anticipation in the strange mosaic of Darth Maul's face as he waited impatiently for a response. Darth Sidious was pleased.

"Move against the Jedi first," he advised softly. "You will then have no difficulty taking the Queen back to Naboo, where she will sign the treaty."

Darth Maul exhaled sharply. Satisfaction permeated his voice. "At last we will reveal ourselves to the Jedi. At last we will have our revenge."

“You have been well trained, my young apprentice,” Darth Sidious soothed. “The Jedi will be no match for you. It is too late for them to stop us now. Everything is going as planned. The Republic will soon be in my control.”

In the silence that followed, the Sith Lord could feel a dark heat rise inside his chest and consume him with a furious pleasure.

In the home of Anakin Skywalker, Qui-Gon Jinn stood silently at the doorway of the boy’s bedroom and watched him sleep. His mother and Padmé occupied the other bedroom, and Jar Jar Binks was curled up on the kitchen floor in a fetal position, snoring loudly.

But Qui-Gon could not sleep. It was this boy—this boy! There was something about him. The Jedi Master watched the soft rise and fall of his chest as he lay locked in slumber, unaware of Qui-Gon’s presence. The boy was special, he had told Shmi Skywalker, and she had agreed. She knew it, too. She sensed it as he did. Anakin Skywalker was different.

Qui-Gon lifted his gaze to a darkened window. The storm had subsided, the wind abated. It was quiet without, the night soft and welcoming in its peace. The Jedi Master thought for a moment on his own life. He knew what they said about him at Council. He was willful, even reckless in his choices. He was strong, but he dissipated his strength on causes that did not merit his attention. But rules were not created solely to govern behavior. Rules were created to provide a road map to understanding the Force. Was it so wrong for him to bend those rules when his conscience whispered to him that he must?

The Jedi folded his arms over his broad chest. The Force was a complex and difficult concept. The Force was rooted in the balance of all things, and every movement within its flow risked an upsetting of that balance. A Jedi sought to keep the balance in place, to move in concert to its pace and will. But the Force existed on more than one plane, and achieving mastery of its multiple passages was a lifetime’s work. Or more. He knew his own weakness. He was too close to the life Force when he should have been more attentive to the unifying Force. He found himself reaching out to the creatures of the present, to those living in the here and now. He had less regard for the past or the future, to the creatures that had or would occupy those times and spaces.

It was the life Force that bound him, that gave him heart and mind and spirit.

So it was he empathized with Anakin Skywalker in ways that other Jedi would discourage, finding in this boy a promise he could not ignore. Obi-Wan would see the boy and Jar Jar in the same light—useless burdens, pointless projects, unnecessary distractions. Obi-Wan

was grounded in the need to focus on the larger picture, on the unifying Force. He lacked Qui-Gon's intuitive nature. He lacked his teacher's compassion for and interest in all living things. He did not see the same things Qui-Gon saw.

Qui-Gon sighed. This was not a criticism, only an observation. Who was to say that either of them was the better for how they interpreted the demands of the Force? But it placed them at odds sometimes, and more often than not it was Obi-Wan's position the Council supported, not Qui-Gon's. It would be that way again, he knew. Many times.

But this would not deter him from doing what he believed he must. He would know the truth about Anakin Skywalker. He would discover his place in the Force, both living and unifying. He would learn who this boy was meant to be.

Minutes later, he was stretched out on the floor, asleep.



The new day dawned bright and clear, Tatooine's twin suns blazing down out of a clear blue sky. The sandstorm had moved on to other regions, sweeping the landscape clean of everything but the mountains and rocky outcroppings of the desert and the buildings of Mos Espa. Anakin was up and dressed before his guests stirred awake, eager to get to the shop and advise Watto of his plan for the upcoming Podrace. Qui-Gon warned him not to be too eager in making his suggestion to the Toydarian, but to stay calm and let Qui-Gon handle the bargaining. But Anakin was so excited he barely heard what the other was saying. The Jedi Master knew it would be up to him to employ whatever mix of cunning and diplomacy was required to achieve their ends.

Greed was the operative word in dealing with Watto, of course, the key that would open any door the Toydarian kept locked.

They walked from the slave quarters through the city to Watto's shop, Anakin leading the way, Qui-Gon and Padmé close at his heels, Jar Jar and R2-D2 bringing up the rear. The city was awake and bustling early, the shopkeepers and merchants shoveling and sweeping away drifts of sand, reassembling stalls and awnings, and righting carts and damaged fences. Eopies and rontos performed the heavy labor where sleds and droids lacked sufficient muscle. Wagons were already hauling fresh supplies and merchandise from warehouses and storage bins, and the receiving bays of the spaceport were back to welcoming ships from off planet.

Qui-Gon let Anakin go on ahead to the shop as they drew near, in order to give the boy a chance to approach Watto on the subject of the Podraces first. With the others in tow, the Jedi Master moved to a food stall across the way, persuaded a vendor to part with a handful of gooey dweezels, and bided his time. When the dweezels were consumed, he moved his group across the plaza to the front of Watto's shop. Jar Jar, already unsettled anew by all the activity, took up a position on a crate near the shop entry, his back to the wall, his eyes darting this way and that in anticipation of something awful befalling him. R2-D2 moved over beside him, beeping softly, trying to reassure

him that everything was okay.

Qui-Gon told Padmé to keep a wary eye on the Gungan. He didn't want Jar Jar getting into any more trouble. He was starting into the shop when the girl put a hand on his arm.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, doubt mirrored clearly in her brown eyes. "Trusting our fate to a boy we hardly know?" She wrinkled her smooth brow. "The Queen would not approve."

Qui-Gon met her gaze squarely. "The Queen does not need to know."

Her eyes blazed defiantly. "Well, I don't approve."

He gave her a questioning look, then turned away wordlessly.

Inside the salvage shop, he found Watto and Anakin engaged in a heated discussion, the Toydarian hovering centimeters from the boy's face, blue wings a blur of motion, snout curled inward as he gestured sharply and purposely with both hands.

"*Patta go bolla!*" he shouted in Huttese, chubby body jerking with the force of his words.

The boy blinked, but held his ground. "*No batta!*"

"*Peedunkel!*" Watto flitted backward and forward, up and down, everything moving at once.

"*Banyo, banyo!*" Anakin shouted.

Qui-Gon moved out of the shadowed entry and into the light where they could see him clearly. Watto turned away from Anakin at once, toothy mouth working, and flew into Qui-Gon's face in a frenzy of ill-concealed excitement.

"The boy tells me you want to sponsor him in the race tomorrow!" The words exploded out of him. "You can't afford parts! How can you afford to enter him in the race? Not on Republic credits, I think!"

He broke into raucous laughter, but Qui-Gon did not miss the hint of curiosity that gleamed in his slitted eyes.

"My ship will be the entry fee," the Jedi advised bluntly.

He reached beneath his poncho and brought out a tiny holoprojector. Clicking on the power source, he projected a hologram of the Queen's transport into the air in front of Watto. The Toydarian flitted closer, studying the projection carefully.

"Not bad. Not bad." The wrinkled blue proboscis bobbed. "A Nubian."

"It's in good order, except for the parts we need." Qui-Gon gave him another moment, then flicked off the holoprojector and tucked it back beneath his poncho.

"But what would the boy ride?" Watto demanded irritably. "He smashed up my Pod in the last race. It will take too long to fix it for the Boonta."

Qui-Gon glanced at Anakin, who was clearly embarrassed. "Aw, it

wasn't my fault, really. Sebulba flashed me with his port vents. I actually saved the Podracer ... mostly."

Watto laughed harshly. "That he did! The boy is good, no doubts there!" He shook his head. "But still ..."

"I have acquired a Pod in a game of chance," Qui-Gon interrupted smoothly, drawing the other's attention back to him. "The fastest ever built."

He did not look at Anakin, but he imagined the expression on the boy's face.

"I hope you didn't kill anyone I know for it!" Watto snapped. He burst into a new round of laughter before bringing himself under control again. "So, you supply the Podracer and the entry fee; I supply the boy. We split the winnings fifty-fifty, I think."

"Fifty-fifty?" Qui-Gon brushed the suggestion aside. "If it's going to be fifty-fifty, I suggest you front the cost of the entry. If we win, you keep all the winnings, minus the cost of the parts I need. If we lose, you keep my ship."

Watto was clearly caught by surprise. He thought the matter through, hand rubbing at his snout, wings beating the air with a buzzing sound. The offer was too good, and he was suspicious. Out of the corner of his eye, Qui-Gon saw Anakin glance over at him nervously.

"Either way, you win," Qui-Gon pointed out softly.

Watto pounded his fist into his open palm. "Deal!" He turned to the boy, chuckling. "Your friend makes a foolish bargain, boy! Better teach him what you know about how to deal for goods!"

He was still laughing as Qui-Gon left the shop.

The Jedi Master collected Padmé, Jar Jar, and R2-D2, and left word for Anakin to join them as soon as Watto would free him up to work on the Podracer. Since Watto was more interested in the upcoming race than in managing the shop, he dismissed the boy at once with instructions to make certain the racer he would be driving was a worthy contender and not some piece of space junk that would cause everyone to laugh at the Toydarian for his foolish decision to enter it in the first place.

As a result, Anakin was home almost before Qui-Gon and the others, eagerly leading them to where his project was concealed in the slave quarter bone yards. The Podracer was shaped like a narrow half cylinder with a rudder-skid attached to its flat bottom, a cockpit carved into its curved top, and steering arms attached at its sides. Sleek Radon-Ulzer fighter engines with scoop-air stabilizers towed the Pod at the end of Steelton cables. The effect was something like seeing a doop bug attached to a pair of banthas.

Working together, the company activated the antigrav lifts and guided the Pod and its enormous engines into the courtyard in back of Anakin's home. With Padmé, Jar Jar, and R2-D2 lending assistance and encouragement, the boy immediately went to work prepping the Pod for the upcoming race.

While Anakin and his helpers were thus engaged, Qui-Gon mounted the back porch of the Skywalker home, glanced around to make certain he was alone, and switched on the comlink to contact Obi-Wan. His protégé answered immediately, anxious for a report, and Qui-Gon filled him in on what was happening.

"If all goes well, we will have our hyperdrive generator by tomorrow afternoon and be on our way," he concluded.

Obi-Wan's silence was telling. "What if this plan fails, Master? We could be stuck here for a long time."

Qui-Gon Jinn looked out over the squalor of the slave quarters and the roofs of the buildings of Mos Espa beyond, the suns a bright glare overhead. "A ship without a power supply will not get us anywhere. We have no choice."

He switched off the comlink and tucked it away. "And there is something about this boy," he whispered to himself, leaving the thought unfinished.

Shmi Skywalker appeared through the back door and moved over to join him. Together they stood watching the activity in the courtyard below.

"You should be proud of your son," Qui-Gon said after a moment. "He gives without any thought of reward."

Shmi nodded, a smile flitting over her worn face. "He knows nothing of greed. Only of dreams. He has ..."

"Special powers."

The woman glanced at him warily. "Yes."

"He can see things before they happen," the Jedi Master continued. "That's why he appears to have such quick reflexes. It is a Jedi trait."

Her eyes were fixed on him, and he did not miss the glimmer of hope that shone there. "He deserves better than a slave's life," she said quietly.

Qui-Gon kept his gaze directed out at the courtyard. "The Force is unusually strong with him, that much is clear. Who was his father?"

There was a long pause, long enough for the Jedi Master to realize he had asked a question she was not prepared to answer. He gave her time and space to deal with the matter, not pressing her, not making it seem as if it were necessary she answer at all.

"There is no father," she said finally. She shook her head slowly. "I carried him, I gave birth to him. I raised him. I can't tell you any more than that."

She touched his arm, drawing his eyes to meet hers. "Can you help him?"

Qui-Gon was silent for a long time, thinking. He felt an attachment to Anakin Skywalker he could not explain. In the back of his mind, he sensed he was meant to do something for this boy, that it was necessary he try. But all Jedi were identified within the first six months of birth and given over to their training. It was true for him, for Obi-Wan, for everyone he knew or had heard about. There were no exceptions.

Can you help him? He did not know how that was possible.

"I don't know," he told her, keeping his voice gentle, but firm. "I didn't come here to free slaves. Had he been born in the Republic, we would have identified him early, and he might have become a Jedi. He has the way. I'm not sure what I can do for him."

She nodded in resignation, but her face revealed, beneath the mask of her acceptance, a glimmer of hope.

As Anakin tightened the wiring on the thruster relays to the left engine, a group of his friends appeared. The older boys were Kitster and Seek, the younger girl was Amee, and the Rodian was Wald. Anakin broke off his efforts to complete the wiring long enough to introduce them to Padmé, Jar Jar, and R2-D2.

"Wow, a real astromech droid!" Kitster exclaimed, whistling softly. "How'd you get so lucky?"

Anakin shrugged. "That isn't the half of it," he declared, puffing up a bit. "I'm entered in the Boonta tomorrow."

Kitster made a face and pushed back his mop of dark hair. "What? With this?"

"That piece of junk has never even been off the ground," Wald said, nudging Amee. "This is such a joke, Annie."

"You've been working on that thing for years," Amee observed, her small, delicate features twisting in disapproval. She shook her blond head. "It's never going to run."

Anakin started to say something in defense of himself, then decided against it. Better to let them think whatever they wanted for now. He would show them.

"Come on, let's go play ball," Seek suggested, already turning away, a hint of boredom in his voice. "Keep it up, Annie, and you're gonna be bug squash."

Seek, Wald, and Amee hurried off, laughing back at him. But Kitster was his best friend and knew better than to doubt Anakin when he said he was going to do something. So Kitster stayed behind, ignoring the others. "What do they know?" he said quietly.

Anakin gave him a grin of appreciation. Then he noticed Jar Jar

fiddling with the left engine's energy binder plate, the power source that locked the engines together and kept them in sync, and the grin disappeared.

"Hey! Jar Jar!" he shouted in warning. "Stay away from those energy binders!"

The Gungan, bent close to the protruding plate, looked up guiltily. "Who, me?"

Anakin put his hands on his hips. "If your hand gets caught in the beam, it will go numb for hours."

Jar Jar screwed up his face, then put his hands behind his back and stuck his billed face back down by the plate. Almost instantly an electric current arced from the plate to his mouth, causing him to yelp and jump back in shocked surprise. Both hands clamped over his mouth as he stood staring at the boy in disbelief.

"1st numm! 1st numm!" Jar Jar mumbled, his long tongue hanging loosely. "My tongue is fat. Dats my bigo oucho." Anakin shook his head and went back to work on the wiring.

Kitster moved close to him, watching silently, his dark face intense. "You don't even know if this thing will run, Annie," he observed with a frown.

Anakin didn't look up. "It will."

Qui-Gon Jinn appeared at his shoulder. "I think it's about time we found out." He handed the boy a small, bulky cylinder. "Use this power pack. I picked it up earlier in the day. Watto has less need for it than you." One corner of his mouth twitched in a mix of embarrassment and amusement.

Anakin knew the value of a power pack. How the Jedi had managed to secure one from under Watto's nose, he had no idea and no interest in finding out. "Yes, sir!" he beamed.

He jumped into the cockpit, fitted the power pack into its sleeve in the control panel, and set the activator to the ON position. Then he pulled on his old, dented racing helmet and gloves. As he did so, Jar Jar, who had been fiddling around at the back of one of the engines, managed to get his hand caught in the afterburner. The Gungan began leaping up and down in terror, his mouth still numb from the shock he had received from the energy binders, his bill flapping to no discernible purpose. Padmé caught sight of him at the last minute—his arms windmilling frantically—and yanked him free an instant before the engines ignited.

Flame exploded from the afterburners, and a huge roar rose from the Radon-Ulzers, building steadily in pitch until Anakin eased off on the thrusters, then settling back into a throaty rumble. Cheers rose from the spectators, and Anakin waved his hand in response.

On the porch of their home, Shmi Skywalker watched wordlessly,

her eyes distant and sad.

Twilight brought a blaze of gold and crimson in the wake of Tatooine's departing suns, a splash of color that filled the horizon in a long, graceful sweep. Night climbed after, darkening the sky, bringing out the stars like scattered shards of crystal. In the deepening black, the land was silent and watchful.

A gleam of bright metal caught the last of the fading suns' rays, and a small transport sped out of the Dune Sea toward Mos Espa. Shovel-nosed and knife-edged, its wings swept back and its vertical stabilizers crimped inward top to bottom, it hugged the landscape as it climbed promontories and descended valleys, searching. Dark and immutable, it had the look of a predator, of a hunter at work.

Beyond the Dune Sea, following the failing light, the craft settled swiftly on the broad plateau of a mesa that gave a long-range view of the land in all directions. Wild banthas scattered with its approach, tossing their hairy heads and massive horns, trumpeting their disapproval. The transport came to rest and its engines shut down. It sat there in silence, waiting.

Then the aft hatchway slid open, metal stairs lowered, and Darth Maul appeared. The Sith Lord had discarded his black robes and wore loose-fitting desert garb, a collared coat belted at the waist, his lightsaber hanging within easy reach. His stunted horns, fully exposed now with his hood removed, formed a wicked crown above his strange red-and-black-colored face. Ignoring the banthas, he walked to the edge of the mesa, produced a pair of low-light electrobinoculars, and began to scan the horizon in all directions.

Desert sand and rocks, he was thinking. Wasteland. But a city there, and another there. And there, a third.

He took the electrobinoculars from his eyes. The lights of the cities were clearly visible against the growing dark. If there were others, they were far on the other side of the Dune Sea where he had already been, or beyond the horizon much farther still where he would later be required to go.

But the Jedi, he believed, were here.

There was no expression on his mosaic face, but his yellow eyes gleamed expectantly. Soon now. Soon.

He lifted his arm to view the control panel strapped to his forearm, picked out the settings he wished to engage, and punched in the calculations required to identify the enemy he was looking for. Jedi Knights would manifest a particularly strong presence in the Force. It took only a minute. He turned back toward his ship. Spherical probe droids floated through the hatchway, one after another. When all were clear, they rocketed away toward the cities he had identified.

Darth Maul watched until they were out of view, the darkness closing quickly now. He smiled faintly. Soon.

Then he walked back to his ship to begin monitoring their response.

* * *

Darkness cloaked Mos Espa in deepening layers as night descended. Anakin sat quietly on the balcony rail of his back porch while Qui-Gon studied a deep cut in the boy's arm. Anakin had sustained the cut sometime during the afternoon's prep work on the Podracer, and in typical boy fashion, he hadn't even noticed it until now.

Anakin gave the injury a cursory glance as the Jedi prepared to clean it, then leaned back to look up at the blanket of stars in the sky.

"Sit still, Annie," Qui-Gon instructed.

The boy barely heard him. "There are so many! Do they all have a system of planets?"

"Most of them." Qui-Gon produced a clean piece of cloth.

"Has anyone been to all of them?"

Qui-Gon laughed. "Not likely."

Anakin nodded, still looking up. "I want to be the first one then, the first to see them all—ouch!"

Qui-Gon wiped a smear of blood from the boy's arm, then applied some antiseptic. "There, good as new."

"Annie! Bedtime!" Shmi called out from inside.

Qui-Gon produced a comlink chip and wiped a sample of Anakin's blood onto its surface. The boy leaned forward interestedly. "What are you doing?"

The Jedi barely looked up. "Checking your blood for infections."

Anakin frowned. "I've never seen—"

"Annie!" his mother called again, more insistent this time. "I'm not going to tell you again!"

"Go on," Qui-Gon urged, gesturing toward the doorway. "You have a big day tomorrow." He tucked the cloth into his tunic. "Good night."

Anakin hesitated, his eyes fixed on the Jedi Master, intense and questioning. Then he turned and darted off into his home. Qui-Gon waited a moment, making sure he was alone, then slipped the chip with the boy's blood sample into a relay slot in the comlink and called Obi-Wan aboard the Queen's transport.

"Yes, Master?" his protégé responded, alert in spite of the lateness of the hour.

"I'm transmitting a blood sample," Qui-Gon advised, glancing about guardedly as he spoke. "Run a midi-chlorian test on it."

He sent the blood readings through the comlink to Obi-Wan and stood waiting in the silence. He could feel the beating of his heart, quick and excited. If he was right about this ...

“Master,” Obi-Wan interrupted his musings. “There must be something wrong with the sample.”

Qui-Gon took a slow, deep breath and exhaled softly. “What do the readings say, Obi-Wan?”

“They say the midi-chlorian count is twenty thousand.” The younger Jedi’s voice tightened. “No one has a count that high. Not even Master Yoda.”

No one. Qui-Gon stood staring out into the night, staggered by the immensity of his discovery. Then he let his gaze wander back toward the hovel where the boy was sleeping, and stiffened.

Shmi Skywalker stood just inside the doorway, staring at him. Their eyes met, and for just an instant it felt to the Jedi Master as if the future had been revealed to him in its entirety. Then Shmi turned away, embarrassed, and disappeared back into her home.

Qui-Gon paused a moment, then remembered the open comlink. “Good night, Obi-Wan,” he said softly, and clicked the transmitter off.

* * *

Midnight approached. Anakin Skywalker, unable to sleep, had slipped out of his bed and gone down into the backyard to complete a final check of the racer, of its controls, its wiring, its relays, its power source—everything he could think of. Now he stood staring at it, trying to determine what he might have missed, what he might have overlooked. He could afford no mistakes. He must make certain he had done all that he could.

So that he would win tomorrow’s race.

Because he must.

He must.

He watched R2-D2 scuttle around the racer, applying paint in broad strokes to its polished metal body, aided by a light projecting from a receptacle mounted over his visual sensors and a steady stream of advice from C-3PO. The boy had activated the latter earlier on the advice of Padmé. Many hands make light work, she had intoned solemnly, then grinned. C-3PO wasn’t much with his hands, but his vocoder was certainly tireless. In any case, R2-D2 seemed to like having him around, exchanging beeps and chirps with his protocol counterpart as he scuttled about the racer. The little astromech droid worked tirelessly, cheerfully, and willingly. Nothing perturbed him. Anakin envied him. Droids were either well put together or they weren’t. Unlike humans, they didn’t respond to weariness or disappointment or fear ...

He chased the thought away quickly and looked up at the starry sky. After a moment, he sat down, his back against a crate of old parts, his goggles and racing helmet at his side. Idly, he fingered the

japor carving in his pocket, the one he was working on for Padmé. His thoughts drifted. He couldn't explain it exactly, but he knew that tomorrow would change his life. That strange ability to see what others did not, that sometimes gave him insights into what would happen, told him so. His future was coming up on him in a rush, he sensed. It was closing fast, giving him no time to consider, ascending with the certainty of a sunrise.

What would it bring him? The question teased at the edges of his consciousness, refusing to show itself. Change, but in what form? Qui-Gon and his companions were the bringers of that change, but he did not think even the Jedi Knight knew for certain what the end result would be.

Maybe the freedom he had dreamed about for himself and his mother, he thought hopefully. Maybe an escape to a new life for both of them. Anything was possible if he won the Boonta. Anything at all.

That thought was still foremost in his cluttered, weary mind when his eyes closed and he fell asleep.

Anakin Skywalker dreamed that night, and in his dream he was of a different, but indeterminate age. He was young still, though not so young as now, but old, too. He was cut from stone, and his thoughts were emblazoned with a vision so frightening he could not bring himself to consider it fully, only to leave it just out of reach, simmering over a fire of ambition and hope. He was in a different place and time, in a world he did not recognize, in a landscape he had never seen. It was vague and shadowy in his dream, all flat and rugged at once, changing with the swiftness of a mirage born out of Tatooine's desert flats.

The dream shimmered, and voices reached out to him, soft and distant. He turned toward them, away from a wave of dark movement that suddenly appeared before him, away from the sleep that gave his dream life.

"I hope you're about finished," he heard Padmé say.

But Padmé was at the head of the dark wave of his dream, and the wave was an army, marching toward him ...

R2-D2 whistled and beeped, and C-3PO chimed in with hasty assurances, saying everything was done, all was in readiness, and he stirred again.

A hand touched his cheek, brushing it softly, and the dream faded and was gone. Anakin blinked awake, rubbing at his eyes, yawning and turning over on his side. He was no longer stretched out by the parts crate where he had fallen asleep the night before, but was back in his own bed.

The hand lifted away from his cheek, and Anakin stared up at Padmé, at a face he found so beautiful it brought a tightness to his throat. Yet he stared at her in confusion, for she had been the central figure in his dream, different from now, older, sadder ... and something more.

"You were in my dream," he said, swallowing hard to get the words out. "You were leading a huge army into battle."

The girl stared at him in wonder, then smiled. "I hope not. I hate fighting." Her voice was merry and light, dismissive in a way that

bothered him. "Your mother wants you to get up now. We have to leave soon."

Anakin climbed to his feet, fully awake. He walked to the back door and stood looking out at the anthill complex of the slave quarters, at the bustle of slaves going about their daily work, at the clear, bright early morning sky that promised good weather for the Boonta Eve race. The Podracer hung level before him on its antigrav lifts, freshly painted and gleaming in the new day's sunlight. R2-D2 bustled about with a brush and can of paint, completing the final detailing of the craft. C-3PO, still missing most of his outer skin, his working parts clearly visible, followed along, pointing out missed patches, giving unsolicited opinions and bits of advice.

The sharp wheeze of an eopie brought him around to find Kitster riding toward them on the first of two of the beasts he had commandeered to help haul the Podracer to the arena. Kitster's dark face was aglow with expectation, and he waved eagerly at Anakin as he approached.

Anakin waved back, shouting, "Hook 'em up, Kitster!" He turned back to Padmé. "Where's Qui-Gon?"

The girl gestured. "He left with Jar Jar for the arena. They've gone to find Watto."

Anakin sprinted to his bedroom to wash and dress.

Qui-Gon Jinn strolled through the main hangar of the Mos Espa Podracer arena, glancing at the activity about him with seemingly casual interest. The hangar was a cavernous building that housed Podracers and equipment year round and served as a staging area for vehicles and crews on race days. A handful of racers were already in place on the service pads, dozens of aliens who had found their way to Tatooine from every corner of the galaxy crawling all over the Pods and engines as pit bosses and pilots shouted instructions. The clash and shriek of metal on metal echoed in an earsplitting din through the hangar's vast chamber, forcing conversations to be held at something approaching a shout.

Jar Jar hugged one shoulder of the Jedi Master while Watto buzzed close by the other. The former was his normal fretful, nervous self, eyes rolling on their stalks, head twisting this way and that with such frantic concern it seemed certain it must soon twist off altogether. Watto flew with blatant disregard for everything but his own conversation, which rambled on and on, covering the same points endlessly.

"So it must be understood clearly that our bargain is sealed, outlander," he repeated for at least the third time in the last ten minutes. His blue-snouted head bobbed with emphasis. "I'll want to

see your spaceship the moment the race is over.”

He made no bones about the fact that he believed that gaining lawful possession of the Naboo transport was only a matter of time. He had not once since Qui-Gon had found him at the betting booths suggested that things might work out otherwise.

The Jedi Master demurred with a shrug. “Patience, my blue friend. You’ll have your winnings before the suns set, and my companions and I will be far away from here.”

“Not if your ship belongs to me, I think!” Watto snorted, and gave a satisfied laugh. Just as quickly, his sharp eyes fixed on the Jedi. “I warn you, no funny business!”

Qui-Gon kept walking, his gaze directed elsewhere, carefully baiting the hook he had set for the Toydarian. “You don’t think Anakin will win?”

Watto flew around in front of him and brought them all to a stop. Wings beating furiously, he motioned to a bright orange racer parked close at hand, its engines modified so that when the energy binders were activated and the engines joined, they formed a distinctive X-shape. Sitting to one side of the racer was the Dug who had attacked Jar Jar two days earlier, Sebulba, his wicked eyes fixed on them, his slender limbs drawn up in a vaguely menacing gesture. A pair of lithesome Twi’leks worked diligently massaging the Dug’s neck and shoulders. The Twi’leks were humanoid aliens from the planet Ryloth; they had pointed teeth, smooth blue skin, and twin tentacles that draped gracefully from their hairless heads down their silken backs. Their red eyes lifted to Qui-Gon momentarily, interest flickering in their depths, then returned quickly to their master.

Watto snorted. “Don’t get me wrong,” he announced, shaking his head in an odd cocking motion. “I have great faith in the boy. He’s a credit to your species.” His snaggle-toothed mouth tightened. “But Sebulba there is going to win, I think.”

Qui-Gon pretended to study the Dug carefully. “Why?”

“Because he always wins!” The Toydarian broke into a fit of laughter, consumed by his own cleverness. “I’m betting heavily on Sebulba!”

“I’ll take that bet,” Qui-Gon said at once.

Watto stopped laughing instantly, jerking away as if scalded by hot oil. “What?” He shook his head in astonishment. “What do you mean?”

Qui-Gon advanced a step, backing the Toydarian away. “I’ll wager my new racing Pod against ...” He trailed off thoughtfully, letting Watto hang. “Against, say, the boy and his mother.”

Watto was aghast. “A Pod for slaves! I don’t think so!” The blue wings were a blur as he flitted this way and that, head cocked. “Well,

perhaps. Just one. The mother, maybe. The boy isn't for sale."

Qui-Gon frowned. "The boy is small. He can't be worth much."

Watto shook his head decisively.

"For the fastest Pod ever built?"

Watto shook his head again.

"Both, or no bet."

They were standing near the front entry of the hangar, and the noise of the crew work had lessened. Beyond, the arena stands rose against the desert sky, a vast, curved complex complete with boxes for the Hutts, a race announcer's booth, course monitoring equipment, and food stands. Already the stands were beginning to fill, the population of Mos Espa turning out in full force for the event, shops and stalls closed, the city on holiday. Bright streamers and banners flew, and approaching racers flamed with the reflection of sunlight and polish.

Qui-Gon caught sight of Anakin appearing through the crowds, riding an eopie with Padmé up behind him, towing one of the massive Radon-Ulzer engines. His friend Kitster followed on a second eopie, towing the other engine. The eopies were gangly, long-snouted pack animals with tough, leathery skin and short fur particularly well-suited to resisting the Tatooine desert heat. R2-D2 and C-3PO trailed the little procession with the Pod and Shmi. The Jedi Master deliberately turned to watch their approach, drawing Watto's gaze after his own. The Toydarian's eyes glittered at the sight of the boy and the racer.

He looked back at Qui-Gon and gave an anxious snort. "No Pod's worth two slaves ... not by a long shot! One slave or nothing!"

Qui-Gon folded his arms over his chest. "The boy, then."

Watto huffed and shook his head. He jerked with the tension his deliberation was generating inside his pudgy blue body. "No, no ..."

Then abruptly he reached inside his pocket and produced a small cube, which he tossed from one hand to the other as if it were too hot to hold. "We'll let fate decide. Blue, it's the boy. Red, it's the mother."

Watto cast the cube to the hangar floor. As he did, Qui-Gon made a small, surreptitious gesture with one hand, calling on his Jedi power to produce a small inflection in the Force.

The cube bounced, rolled, settled, blue side facing up. Watto threw up his hands angrily, his eyes turning narrow and sharp.

"You won the toss, outlander!" he sneered in dismissal. "But you won't win the race, so it makes little difference, I think."

"We'll see," Qui-Gon replied calmly.

Anakin and the others reached them, entering the hangar with the Pod and engines. Watto wheeled away from Qui-Gon in a huff, pausing long enough to snap irritably at the boy.

“Better stop your friend’s betting,” he declared with an angry snort, “or I’ll end up owning him, too!”

One of the eopies sniffed expectantly at him, and he swore at the beast in Huttese with such ferocity that it backed away. His wings beating madly, Watto gave Qui-Gon a withering glance and flew off into the hangar shadows.

“What did he mean by that?” Anakin asked as he slowed the eopie beside Qui-Gon, glancing after the retreating Toydarian.

Qui-Gon shrugged. “I’ll tell you later.”

Kitster pulled to a stop beside Anakin, his face alight with excitement as he looked around. “This is so wizard! I’m sure you’ll do it this time, Annie!”

Padmé’s gaze shifted from one to the other. “Do what?” she asked suspiciously.

Kitster beamed. “Finish the race, of course!”

The girl paled. Her eyes burned into Anakin. “You’ve never even *finished* a race?” she demanded incredulously.

The boy blushed. “Well ... not exactly.” His mouth tightened with determination. “But Kitster’s right. I will this time.”

Qui-Gon took the eopie’s reins in his hand and patted the boy’s leg. “Of course, you will,” he agreed.

From atop the eopie, Padmé Naberrie just stared at him wordlessly.

In the center of Mos Espa the crowds were beginning to thin as the population gravitated in increasing numbers toward the Podracer arena at the edge of the spaceport. Most of the shops and stalls were already closed, and the rest were in the process of doing so. Owners and vendors were completing sales and glancing anxiously in the direction of the traffic’s steady flow.

Amid the confusion and bustle, a Sith probe droid slowly floated along, mechanical eye traveling from shop to shop, from face to face, searching.

Over a hundred thousand beings had filled the Podracer arena by midmorning, jamming into the grandstand seats, crowding onto the broad viewing platforms, filling the available space. The arena became a vast sea of color and movement and sound in the emptiness of the surrounding desert. Flags and banners bearing the insignia of the racers and their sponsors waved over the assemblage, signifying favorites and creating impromptu cheering sections. Bands played in support of some racers, and isolated horns and drums beat in wild appreciation for all. Vendors walked the aisles, carrying food and drink from canopied stands below to sell to the crowd. Everywhere, excitement and anticipation was building.

Then a roar erupted as the racers began to emerge from the main

hangar on the far side of the start line. One by one the Podracers hove into view, some towed by eopies, some by hand, some by repulsorsled, all part of a long procession of pilots, pit crews, and hangers-on. Standard bearers, each carrying a flag that identified the pilot and sponsor, marched along, forming a colorful line in front of the assembly of Podracers. Overhead, the twin suns of Tatooine shone down with a bright, hungry glare.

As the racers moved onto the track in front of the arena stands, a flurry of movement in the royal box signaled the arrival of Jabba the Hutt and Gardulla, his female friend. Slithering into the cooled interior of the box, the two Hutts oozed their way along the flooring to their designated places amid the bright silks that draped the rough stone. Jabba came foremost, proceeding directly to the arched overlook where he could be seen by the people of Mos Espa. Lifting his pudgy arm in greeting, he basked in the crowd's appreciative roar. Gardulla muttered her approval, nodding her neckless head on the end of a thick, shapeless body, slitted eyes glittering. A coterie of humans and aliens filed in behind the two Hutts, guests of Mos Espa's rulers on race day, a coveted designation. A line of slave girls of varying species came last, chained together, there for the amusement of those who had chosen freely to attend.

Below, the Podracer pilots formed a line facing the royal box and on command bowed deeply in recognition of and to pay homage to their benefactor.

"Chowbaso!" Jabba rumbled, his deep voice echoing through the sound enhancers and out across the flats. *"Tam ka chee Boonta rulee ya, kee madd ahdrudda du wundee! Welcome!"*

The crowd roared some more, arms and flags waving madly. Horns sounded as Jabba began his introduction of the racers.

"Kubba tee. Sebulba tuta Pixelito!"

The Dug, standing immediately next to Anakin, rose on his back legs and waved to the stands. A band played wildly in support, and Sebulba's fans and anxious bettors depending on the odds that favored the Dug cheered and shouted in response.

One by one, Jabba recognized the Podracer pilots. Gasgano. Boles Roor. Ben Quadinaros. Aldar Beedo. Ody Mandrell. Xelbree. Mars Guo. Clegg Holdfast. Bozzie Baranta. Wan Sandage. Anakin listened to the names, shifting anxiously, eager to begin. A glance over his shoulder revealed Kitster at work attaching the Radon-Ulzers to his Pod with the Steelton cables, checking the fastenings with sharp tugs.

"... Mawhonic tuta Hok," Jabba boomed. *"Teemto Pagalies tuta Moonus Mandel. Anakin Skywalker tuta Tatooine ..."*

Applause burst from the crowd, though it was not as enthusiastic as it had been for Sebulba or Gasgano or several of the others. Anakin

waved in response, eyes traveling over the thousands gathered, his mind already out in the flats.

When he turned to walk to his racer, his mother was standing in front of him. Her worn face was calm and determined as she bent down to give him a hug and a kiss. Her eyes were steady as she backed him off, her hands gripping his shoulders, and she could not quite mask the worry reflected there.

"Be safe, Annie," she told him.

He nodded, swallowing. "I will, Mom. I promise."

She smiled, warm and reassuring, and moved away. Anakin continued on, watching Kitster and Jar Jar unhitch the eopies so that Kitster could lead them away. R2-D2 rolled up to Anakin and beeped with approval and reassurance. C-3PO solemnly warned against the dangers of driving too fast and wished his master well. All was ready.

Jar Jar patted the boy on the back, his billed face a mask of worry and consternation. "Tis very loony, Annie. May da Guds be kind, me friend."

Out of the corner of his eye Anakin saw Sebulba wander over from his own racer and begin examining the boy's. Hitching along on his spindly legs, he worked his way around the Radon-Ulzers with undisguised interest. Stopping finally at the left engine, he reached up suddenly and banged hard on a stabilizer, glancing around quickly to see if anyone had noticed.

Padmé appeared and bent down to kiss Anakin's cheek. Her dark eyes were intense. "You carry all our hopes," she said quietly.

Anakin's lower lip jutted out. "I won't let you down."

She gave him a long stare, then moved away. As she did so, Sebulba sidled up to him, his wizened, whiskery face angling close.

"You won't walk away from this one, slave scum," he wheezed softly, grinning. "You're bantha poodoo."

Anakin stood his ground, giving the Dug a stony look. "Don't count on it, slime face."

Qui-Gon was approaching, and Sebulba backed away toward his own racer, malevolence mirrored in his flat stare. Horns blared, and a new roar rose from the crowd. Jabba the Hutt oozed to the lip of the royal box, his thick arms lifting.

"*Kaa bazza kundee da tam hdruddal*" he growled. "Let the challenge begin!"

The roar of the crowd began to build even further. Qui-Gon helped Anakin climb into his Pod. The boy settled himself in place in the seat, securing his straps, fitting his old, battered racing helmet over his head and bringing down his goggles.

"Are you all set, Annie?" the Jedi Master asked calmly. The boy nodded, eyes intense, steady. Qui-Gon held his gaze. "Remember,

concentrate on the moment. Feel, don't think. Trust your instincts."

He put a hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled. "May the Force be with you, Annie."

Then he backed away, and Anakin Skywalker was alone.

Qui-Gon moved quickly through the crowd to the viewing platform where Shmi, Padmé, and Jar Jar waited. He glanced back only once at Anakin and found the boy calmly fitting his goggles in place. The Jedi Master nodded to himself. The boy would do all right.

He mounted the viewing platform with Jar Jar and the women just as it began to lift into position for the race. Shmi gave him a worried, questioning look.

"He's fine," Qui-Gon assured her, touching her shoulder.

Padmé shook her head doubtfully. "You Jedi are far too reckless," she said quietly. "The Queen—"

"The Queen trusts my judgment, young handmaiden," Qui-Gon interrupted smoothly, directing his words only to her. "Perhaps you should, too."

She glared at him. "You assume too much."

The viewing platform locked into place, and all eyes turned toward the racers. Energy binders were engaged, powerful electromagnetic currents arcing between coaxial plates, locking the twin engines of each Podracer together as a single unit. Now the engines themselves began to turn over, their booming coughs and rumbles mingling with and then overwhelming the roar of the crowd. Flag bearers and pit crews moved hastily aside, clearing the start line beneath the arch that marked the beginning and end of the race. Overhead, a red light held the racers in place. Anticipating the green, the pilots gunned their engines, the massive casings shaking with the force of the power they generated, the cables that bound them to the Pods and their drivers straining to break free.

Standing next to Qui-Gon, Jar Jar Binks covered his eyes in dismay. "Me no watch. Dis gonna be messy!"

Though he could not bring himself to say so, the Jedi Master was inclined to agree. *Steady; Anakin Skywalker;* he thought to himself. *Concentrate.*

Then the light over the starting line flashed bright green, and the race was under way.

When the starting light turned green, Anakin Skywalker jammed the twin thruster bars to the extreme forward position, sending maximum power to the Radon-Ulzers. The big rocket engines bucked, roared like a caged beast, and promptly died.

The boy froze. All around him, racers shot from the start in a cacophony of sound and a flashing of bright metal. Sand fountained in the wake of their passing, clouding the air in a whirlwind of grit. In seconds, the boy was alone, save for Ben Quadinaros's Quadra-Pod, which sat stalled at the starting line in mirror image of his own.

Anakin's mind raced desperately. He'd fed in too much fuel from a dead start. The reworked engines couldn't handle all that power at once if the racer wasn't already moving. He yanked back on the thruster bars, returning them to the neutral position. Ratcheting back the switches to the feeder dump, he cleared the lines, then sealed them anew. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the ignition buttons. The starters cranked over and caught, and the big Radon-Ulzers roared to life with a booming cough. He fed in fuel more cautiously this time, impatience flooding through him, then slid the thruster bars forward smoothly. The engines shot ahead, dragging the Pod and the boy after them, exploding out of the start.

Anakin gave chase with single-minded determination, not bothering with anything but the dots in the distance that marked the location of the other racers. He tore across the flats, the whine of the Pod's engines growing steadily sharper, the land beneath fading to a wash of heat and light. The course was flat and open in the beginning, and he pushed the thruster bars forward some more. He was accelerating so quickly that everything about him turned swiftly to a sun-drenched blur.

Ahead, the first set of rock formations rose up against the horizon. Anakin could see the other Podracers now, bright metal shapes whipping across the flats, engines throwing off fire and smoke. He closed on them quickly, the Radon-Ulzers screaming. In an open stretch, he knew, there were no other engines that could match them.

A flush of white-hot excitement burned through him as he caught

the trailing Podracers.

He hauled back on the thruster bars as he came up on them, giving himself space to maneuver. He went by two as if they were standing still, angling his way left and then right, threading the needle of space they had left between them. When he was clear, he fed power to the engines anew, and the g-force slammed him back against his padded seat. He caught multilimbed Gasgano next. Easing up to the Troiken's snub-nosed Podracer, he got ready to pass. Arch Canyon loomed ahead, and he wanted to be clear of the others when he navigated through the ravine. Maneuvering cautiously, he prepared to overtake on the right. But Gasgano saw him, and quickly moved to cut him off. Anakin waited, then angled left for another try. Again, Gasgano cut him off. Back and forth they slid above the desert floor like a krayt dragon chasing a womp rat.

A cliff drop off a low mesa appeared as a ragged line on the horizon. Anakin slowed, giving Gasgano the impression he was preparing for a drop shift. The wiry pilot, glancing back quickly to make certain where the boy was, held his position until he reached the mesa edge, then took the drop first. The moment he did so, Anakin jammed the thruster bars all the way forward, and his racer accelerated with such speed that it rocketed right over the top of Gasgano before the other could do anything to prevent it.

The dark crease of the canyon loomed ahead, and Anakin threaded the eye of its needle opening with a seamstress's skill, racing into the cool shadows beyond. The Radon-Ulzers hummed anxiously, the energy binders keeping them in sync, the Steelton cables drawing on the racing Pod with just the right amount of give through the wicked turns. Anakin worked the thruster bars with small, precise movements, envisioning the course in his mind—each twist, each deviation, each rise and drop. Everything was clear and certain to him. Everything was revealed.

He shot through the canyon and back out onto the open flats. Ahead, beyond a dozen others, Mawhonic and Sebulba fought for the lead. The Dug's distinctive X-shaped engines lifted and rose, maneuvering for position. But Mawhonic's slender racer was slowly gliding away.

Then Sebulba accelerated and swung violently left, careening toward the other pilot. Mawhonic reacted instinctively, swinging left as well—and directly into a massive rock formation. Mawhonic disappeared in a huge ball of flame and black smoke.

Next it was Xelbree challenging, trying to sneak past Sebulba from above, much as Anakin had done with Gasgano. But the Dug sensed his presence and rose to block his passage. Xelbree slid left, drawing alongside, holding fast. Sebulba seemed to lose ground, to give way

slightly. But when Xelbree was next to him, the Dug triggered a side vent in his left exhaust. Fire spewed laterally into Xelbree's engine, cutting apart the metal housing as if it were made of flimsiplast. Xelbree tried frantically to move away, but he was too slow. Fuel caught and ignited. The damaged engine exploded, and the remaining engine and its Pod flew off into a cliff face and shattered.

Without slowing, Sebulba sped away from the wreckage, alone at the head of the pack.

In the arena stands and from viewing platforms scattered throughout the course, the crowd watched the progress of the race on handheld viewscreens as pictures of the racers were transmitted from droid observation holocams. From a monitoring tower, a two-headed announcer who bantered incessantly with himself reported on the leaders. Qui-Gon studied a screen with Padmé and Shmi, but there was neither mention nor sight of Anakin. The announcer's twin voices rose and fell in measured cadence, filling the air with their inflection, building in pitch to stir the already frenzied crowd.

Qui-Gon stared out into the flats, searching for movement. On his right, Jar Jar bickered with a skinny, sour-faced alien named Fanta, trying to peer over his shoulder, besieging him with questions, trying to make friends in the mistaken belief that because they looked vaguely alike, the Poldt would reciprocate his overtures. It wasn't working out. Fanta wanted nothing to do with Jar Jar and kept his back turned to the Gungan, deliberately hiding the screen from view. Jar Jar was growing impatient.

Qui-Gon shifted his gaze. In the crew pits, R2-D2, C-3PO, and Kitster waited in solitary isolation.

In a private box somewhat in back of and lower than Jabba's, Watto laughed and joked with his friends. The Toydarian flitted this way and that, catching glimpses of the race on various viewscreens, rubbing his hands together anxiously. He caught sight of Qui-Gon and gestured rudely, his meaning clear.

Below, at the start line, Ben Quadinaros still struggled to ignite the engines of his Quadra-Pod.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes and blocked everything away, sounds and movements alike, becoming one with the Force, disappearing into its flow, searching for Anakin. He stayed lost within himself as the roar of the crowd lifted anew, and the sound of rocket engines rose out of the distance. At the edge of the horizon, a clump of dark specks hove into view.

On the starting line, Ben Quadinaros finally managed to start the engines of his racer, all four bulbous monsters roaring to life, vibrating wildly within their casings. Engines and Pod lurched as

Quadinaros locked in the thrusters. But in the next instant the energy binders collapsed under the strain, the connecting cables snapped, and the engines shot off in four separate directions, exploding against stone walls, rock formations, and low dune banks. The crowd gasped in shock, shielding eyes and covering ears as the Pod and Ben Quadinaros collapsed to the racetrack in a useless heap.

Almost simultaneously Sebulba's racer screamed past the arena, shooting under the finish arch, and rocketing off on the start of the second lap. Two other racers followed, their engines roaring loudly as they whipped past, their colorful metal bodies agleam in the midday suns.

There was no sign of Anakin.

Qui-Gon kept his eyes closed, searching within his consciousness. Beside him, Shmi and Padmé exchanged worried glances. Jar Jar still hung on Fanta, pounding him on the back now in excitement as the other grimaced and tried to move away.

Three more racers tore past, the sound of their engines dying into silence as they faded from view. A fourth, Ody Mandrell, turned into the pits, the engines of his Pod shaking and smoking as he screeched to a stop. Pit droids rushed to service the racer, swarming over the engines. Ody stood up in the cockpit, a big, squat, reptilian Er'Kit, arms gesturing. But when the engines ignited anew, DUM-4, a pit droid, was standing at the left intake, and the engine sucked it inside, chewed it up, and spit it out the exhaust in a mangled heap.

The crowd went back to their viewscreens, intent on the race.

Then R2-D2, standing with Kitster and C-3PO at the edge of their station, gave an excited beep.

Qui-Gon's eyes snapped open. "Here he comes!" he exclaimed quickly.

Anakin Skywalker exploded out of the midday glare, the big Radon-Ulzers howling in fury.

Amid the cheers and shouts of his companions and the crowd, Qui-Gon Jinn just smiled. Anakin had begun to overtake the pack.

At the beginning of the second lap, Anakin was in sixth place. As the race progressed, he was slowly disappearing into the workings of his racer, becoming one with its engines, feeling the strain and tug on each rivet and screw. Wind whipped by him in a screaming rush, locking him away in its white noise. There was only himself and the machine, all speed and response. It was the way racing affected him, melding his body with the Pod and engines until he was a part of both. Moment by moment, the symbiosis deepened, joining them, giving him insights and understandings that transcended his senses and knowledge, projecting him past the present and into a place

others could not reach.

Approaching Arch Canyon, he bore down on the leaders, young face intense. Skimming the flats, he whipped past Aldar Beedo and sideslipped Clegg Holdfast. To one side, a fast-closing Ody Mandrell banked too hard over a sandy rise and caught his engine in the sand. Ody's racer cartwheeled in a spectacular twisting of engines and Pod and exploded apart.

Anakin was only four racers back from Sebulba and could see the Dug's craft clearly in the distance.

Everything happened quickly after that.

The racers whipped through Arch Canyon and out the other side in a ragged line, with Anakin narrowing the gap between himself and the others. Tusken Raiders, hiding in the rocks of the cliffs that formed the corner of Tusken Turn, got lucky and hit Teemto Pagalies. Teemto's racer simply exploded and was gone. Anakin flew through the vaporized wreckage in pursuit of the others. He passed Elan Mak and Habba Kee in a rush. Ahead, Mars Guo was closing on Sebulba, wary of the Dug, keeping down and away, trying to sneak past. Anakin drew nearer to both, leapfrogging sand dunes in a long depression, easing slowly up on Mars Guo.

Suddenly Sebulba reached out of his Pod's cockpit and released a ragged bit of metal directly into Mars Guo's left engine intake. Metal clashed violently against metal, and the damaged engine began to spew smoke and fire. Mars tried to hold the machine steady, but the failing engine bucked and lost power, causing the Pod to veer sharply into Anakin. The racers collided in a shriek of metal, and a leading edge of Mars Guo's vertical stabilizer snagged the Steelton line to Anakin's left engine and released the binding.

Instantly Anakin's Pod began to swing violently at the end of its single remaining line, whipsawing back and forth. The Radon-Ulzers continued to act in concert, locked together by the energy binders, but the racer was out of control. Anakin worked the stabilizer pedals with his feet, fighting to hold the Pod steady as it swung like a pendulum. The unhooked line snapped viciously in the wake of the engine's exhaust, threatening to tangle or snag on an outcropping and drag the racer down. Anakin groped along the floor of his cockpit, searching for the magnetic retriever. When he found it, he flicked on the power button and extended the retriever out to the left side, trying to make contact with the loose line. The effort forced him to pull back on the thruster bars to cut power, and he fell behind Sebulba once more. Elan Mak, Habba Kee, and now Obitoki as well swept by him, giving chase to the Dug.

Anakin glanced frantically over his shoulder. The bulk of the pack was closing on him once more.

After a dozen tries, he finally focused his concentration sufficiently to snag the loose engine line with the retriever and maneuver it back to its hook. Sweat and grit coated his face, and his jacket sleeve was ripped. Casting down the retriever, he jammed the thruster bars forward once more. Stabilized at the ends of the Steelton lines, the Pod held steady now as the Radon-Ulzers bucked, and the racer accelerated after the leaders.

Anakin caught Elan Mak first and slid around him easily. He was closing on Habba Kee when Obitoki tried to pass Sebulba. The Dug waited until his rival had pulled alongside, then used the same tactic he had employed against Xelbree. Opening a small side vent in the left exhaust, he sent a gush of fire into the housing of Obitoki's right engine. Fuel in the lines caught fire and exploded, and Obitoki's racer dived nose first into the desert, sending a wide spray of grit everywhere.

Habba Kee flew into it just ahead of Anakin, low and tight to the ground. Momentarily blinded, he swerved the wrong way and caught a piece of one of Obitoki's engines where it jutted from the sand. Engines and Pod tangled and crashed in a wild explosion. Anakin followed Habba Kee into the smoke and grit, blinded as well. A piece of steaming metal flew at him out of the haze, careening off his right engine housing and barely missing his head. But the boy was seeing with more than his eyes, sensing with his mind, calm and steady within himself. He could feel the danger waiting, and he worked the thruster bars smoothly, sliding past the wreckage.

Then he was in the clear again and bearing down on Sebulba.

He caught the Dug as they screamed past the arena and under the finish arch for the start of the third and final lap.

In his mind, Anakin could see Qui-Gon and Jar Jar watching him; Kitster, standing in the crew pits, his friend cheering wildly, and R2-D2 and C-3PO, the former beeping, the latter nattering back at him in response; Padmé, her beautiful face framed with worry; and his mother, her eyes filled with terror. He could see them all, as if he were standing among them, standing outside himself, watching the race ...

He blocked their faces away, banished the images from his thoughts, and focused everything on Sebulba.

They were speeding out of Arch Canyon when Sebulba decided to put an end to Anakin once and for all. The Dug knew where all the droid observation cams were situated. He knew the angles of placement and how to avoid giving himself away. Swinging his racer close to Anakin's, he opened the side vent on his exhaust and tried to scorch the boy's engine housing as he had done with Xelbree and Obitoki. But Anakin had fallen victim to that particular trick once

before and was looking for it this time. He shifted just above the cutting flame and out of reach. When Sebulba tried to follow, Anakin dropped down again—but too far, momentarily losing control. His racer veered from the course right into a line of warning signs, sending them flying in all directions. Desperate to recover, he lifted the nose of his craft skyward, jammed his thruster bars forward, and accelerated. The Radon-Ulzers boomed, his racer gave a frightening lurch, and he leapfrogged right over Sebulba to take the lead.

Down through the first set of caves and past Tusken Turn the racers tore, Anakin leading, Sebulba right on his tail. At speeds too great for maintaining proper control, the antagonists banked and angled as if safety were of no importance at all.

And finally burst into the clear once more.

Again, Sebulba tried to regain the lead, pushing for an opening. Anakin held him off, but then one of the horizontal stabilizers on the left engine began to shudder violently. A momentary vision of Sebulba hammering on his stabilizer just before the start of the race flashed through Anakin's mind. He eased off on the thruster bars, jettisoned the stabilizer, and switched to an auxiliary mount. In the process, he was forced to give way. Sebulba raced past him to take command of the lead once more.

Time and space were running out on Anakin Skywalker. He shoved the thruster bars forward and went after the Dug. Sebulba saw him coming and fishtailed his Pod back and forth in front of the boy to keep him from passing. Over the courseway they sped, jockeying for position. Anakin tried everything he knew, but Sebulba was a seasoned veteran and was able to counter each attempt. Metta Drop flew past as the racers roared out of the dune hills and onto the final stretch of flats.

Finally Anakin shifted left, then right. But this time when Sebulba moved to block him, Anakin faked a third shift, drawing the Dug left again. The instant Sebulba began his blocking move, Anakin jerked his racer hard to the right and nosed in beside the Dug.

Down the flat, open final stretch of the course the Podracers tore, side by side, the arena stands and warding statuary beginning to take shape ahead. Sebulba screamed in frustration and deliberately swerved his Pod into Anakin's. Infuriated by the boy's dogged persistence, he slammed into him, once, twice. But on the third strike, their steering rods caught, locking them together. Anakin fought with his controls, trying to break free, but the Pods were hooked fast. Sebulba laughed, jamming his racer against the boy's in an effort to force him into the ground. Anakin whipped the thruster bars forward and back, trying to disengage from the tangle. The Radon-Ulzers strained with the effort, and the steering rods groaned and bent.

Finally Anakin's rod broke completely, snapping off both the armature and the main horizontal stabilizer. The boy's Pod jerked and spun at the ends of the Steelton cables, shimmying with such force that Anakin would have been thrown from the Pod if he had not been strapped down.

But it was much worse for Sebulba. When Anakin's steering arm snapped, the Dug's Pod shot forward as if catapulted, collapsing the towlines, sending the engines screaming out of control. One engine slammed into a piece of the ancient statuary and disintegrated in flames. Then the second went, ramming into the sand and exploding in a massive fireball. The towing cables broke free, and the Dug's Pod was sent skidding through the flaming wreckage of the engines, twisting and bumping violently along the desert floor to a smoking stop. Sebulba extricated himself in a shrieking fit, throwing pieces of his ruined Pod in all directions only to discover that his pants were on fire.

Anakin Skywalker flew overhead, the exhausts from the big Radon-Ulzers sending sand and grit into the Dug's face in a stinging spray. Hanging on to maintain control as he crossed the finish line, he became, at nine years of age, the youngest winner ever of the Boonta Eve race.

As the viewing platform he occupied with Shmi, Padmé, and Jar Jar slowly lowered, Qui-Gon watched the crowd surge toward Anakin's racer. The boy had brought the Pod to a skidding halt in the center of the raceway, shut down the Radon-Ulzers, and climbed out. Kitster had already reached him and was hugging him tightly, and R2-D2 and C-3PO were scuttling around them both. When the crowd converged moments later, they hoisted Anakin aloft and carried him away, chanting and shouting his name.

Qui-Gon exchanged a warm smile with Shmi, nodding his approval of the boy's performance. Anakin Skywalker was special indeed.

The viewing platform settled in place smoothly, and its occupants off-loaded onto the raceway in a rush. Allowing his companions to join the celebration, the Jedi Master turned back toward the stands. Ascending the stairways swiftly, he reached Watto's private box in minutes. A knot of aliens departed just in front of him, laughing and joking in several languages, counting fistfuls of currency and credits. Watto was staring out at the chanting crowd, hovering at the edge of the viewport, a dejected look on his wrinkled blue face.

The moment he caught sight of Qui-Gon, his dejection transformed, and he flew at the Jedi Master in undisguised fury.

"You! You swindled me!" He bounced in the air in front of Qui-Gon, shaking with rage. "You knew the boy was going to win! Somehow you knew it! I lost everything!"

Qui-Gon smiled benignly. "Whenever you gamble, my friend, eventually you'll lose. Today wasn't your day." The smile dropped away. "Bring the hyperdrive parts to the main hangar right away. I'll come by your shop later so you can release the boy."

The Toydarian shoved his snout against Qui-Gon's nose. "You can't have him! It wasn't a fair bet!"

Qui-Gon looked him up and down with a chilly stare. "Would you like to discuss it with the Hutts? I'm sure they would be happy to settle the matter."

Watto jerked as if stung, his beady eyes filled with hate. "No, no! I want no more of your tricks." He gestured emphatically. "Take the

boy! Be gone!”

He wheeled away and flew out of the box, body hunched beneath madly beating wings. Qui-Gon watched him depart, then started down the stairs for the racetrack, his mind already turning to other things.

Had he not been so preoccupied with his plans for what lay ahead, he might have caught sight of the Sith probe droid trailing after.

Within an hour, the arena had emptied, the racers had been stored or hauled away for repairs, and the main hangar left almost deserted. A few pit droids were still engaged in salvaging pieces of wreckage from the race, coming and going in steady pursuit of their work. Anakin alone of the Pod pilots remained, checking over his damaged racer. He was dirty and ragged, his hair spiky and his face streaked with sweat and grime. His jacket was torn in several places, and there was blood on his clothing where he had slashed his arm on a jagged piece of metal during the battle with Sebulba.

Qui-Gon watched him thoughtfully, standing to one side with Padmé and Shmi as the boy, Jar Jar, R2-D2, and C-3PO moved busily over the Pod and engines. Could it be? he was wondering for what must have been the hundredth time, pondering the way the boy handled a Podracer, the maturity he exhibited, and the instincts he possessed. Was it possible?

He shelved his questions for another time. It would be up to the Council to decide. Abruptly, he left the women, walking over to the boy and kneeling beside him.

“You’re a bit worse for wear, Annie,” he said softly, placing his hands on the boy’s shoulders and looking him in the eyes, “but you did well.” Smiling reassuringly, he wiped a patch of dirt off the boy’s face. “There, good as new.”

He ruffled the boy’s unruly hair and helped bind his injured arm. Shmi and Padmé joined them and were moved to give Anakin fresh hugs and kisses, checking him over carefully, touching his cheeks and forehead.

“Ah, gee ... enough of this,” the boy mumbled in embarrassment.

His mother smiled, shaking her head. “It’s so wonderful, Annie—what you’ve done here. Do you know? You’ve brought hope to those who have none. I’m so very proud of you.”

“We owe you everything,” Padmé added quickly, giving him an intense, warm look.

Anakin blushed scarlet. “Just feeling this good is worth anything,” he declared, smiling back.

Qui-Gon walked over to where the hyperdrive parts were loaded on an antigrav repulsorsled harnessed to a pair of eopies. Watto had made delivery as promised, though not without considerable

grumbling and a barrage of thinly veiled threats. Qui-Gon checked the container straps, glanced out into the midday heat, and walked back to the others.

“Padmé, Jar Jar, let’s go,” he ordered abruptly. “We’ve got to get these parts back to the ship.”

The group moved over to the eopies, laughing and talking. Padmé hugged and kissed Anakin again, then climbed onto one of the eopies behind Qui-Gon, taking hold of his waist. Jar Jar swung onto the second animal and promptly slid off the other side, collapsing in a heap. R2-D2 beeped encouragingly as the Gungan tried again, this time managing to keep his seat. Good-byes and thank-yous were exchanged, but it was an awkward moment for Anakin. He looked as if he wanted to say something to Padmé, moving up beside her momentarily, staring up at her expectantly. But all he could manage was a sad, confused look.

Slowly, the eopies began to move off, Anakin and his mother standing with C-3PO, waving after.

“I’ll return the eopies by midday,” Qui-Gon promised, calling over his shoulder.

Padmé did not look back at all.

Qui-Gon Jinn and company rode out of Mos Espa into the Tatooine desert, R2-D2 leading the way, rolling along in front of the eopies and sled at a steady pace. The suns were rising quickly to a midday position in the sky, and the heat rose off the sand in waves. But the journey back to the Queen’s transport was accomplished swiftly and without incident.

Obi-Wan was waiting for them, appearing down the rampway as soon as they neared, his youthful face intense. “I was getting worried,” he announced without preamble.

Qui-Gon dismounted, then helped Padmé down. “Start getting this hyperdrive generator installed,” he ordered. “I’m going back. I have some unfinished business.”

“Business?” his protégé echoed, arching one eyebrow.

“I won’t be long.”

Obi-Wan studied him a moment, then sighed. “Why do I sense we’ve picked up another stray?”

Qui-Gon took his arm and moved him away from the others. “It’s the boy who’s responsible for getting us these parts.” He paused. “The boy whose blood sample you ran the midi-chlorian test on last night.”

Obi-Wan gave him a hard, steady look, then turned away.

On a rise overlooking the spacecraft, hidden in the glare of the suns and the ripple of the dunes, the Sith probe droid hung motionless for a final transmission, then quickly sped away.

Anakin walked home with his mother and C-3PO, still wrapped in the euphoria of his victory, but wrestling as well with his sadness over the departure of Padmé. He hadn't thought about what would happen to her if he won the Boonta Eve, that it would mean Qui-Gon would secure the hyperdrive generator he needed to make their transport functional. So when she bent to kiss and hug him good-bye, it was the first time he had given the matter any serious thought since her arrival. He was stunned, caught in a mix of emotions, and all of a sudden he wanted to tell her to stay. But he couldn't bring himself to speak the words, knowing how foolish they would sound, realizing she couldn't do so in any case.

So he stood there like a droid without its vocoder, watching her ride away behind Qui-Gon, thinking it might well be the last time he would ever see her, and wondering how he was going to live with himself if it was.

Unable to sit still once he had walked his mother to their home, he placed C-3PO back in his bedroom, deactivated him, and went out again. Qui-Gon had told him he was relieved of any work today at Watto's, so he pretty much could do what he wanted until the Jedi returned. He gave no thought to what would happen then, wandering down toward Mos Espa Way, waving as his name was shouted out from every quarter on his journey, basking in the glow of his success. He still couldn't quite believe it, and yet it felt as if he had always known he would win this race. Kitster appeared, then Amee and Wald, and soon he was surrounded by a dozen others.

He was just approaching the connector to Mos Espa Way when a Rodian youngster, bigger than himself, blocked his way. Anakin had cheated, the Rodian sneered. He couldn't have won the Boonta Eve any other way. No slave could win anything.

Anakin was on top of him so fast the bigger being barely had time to put up his arms in defense before he was on the ground. Anakin was hitting him as hard and fast as he could, not thinking about anything but how angry he was, not even aware that the source of his anger had nothing to do with his victim and everything to do with losing Padmé.

Then Qui-Gon, returned by now with the eopies, was looming over him. He pulled Anakin away, separating the two fighters, and demanded to know what this was all about. Somewhat sheepishly, but still angry, Anakin told him. Qui-Gon studied him carefully, disappointment registering on his broad features. He fixed the young Rodian with his gaze and asked him if he still believed Anakin had cheated. The youngster, glowering at Anakin, said he did.

Qui-Gon put his hand on Anakin's shoulder and steered him away from the crowd, not saying anything until they were out of hearing.

"You know, Annie," he said then, his deep voice thoughtful, "fighting didn't change his opinion. The opinions of others, whether you agree with them or not, are something you have to learn to tolerate."

He walked the boy back toward his home, counseling him quietly about the way life worked, hand resting on his shoulder in a way that made Anakin feel comforted. As they neared the boy's home, the Jedi reached beneath his poncho and produced a leather pouch filled with credits.

"These are yours," he announced. "I sold the Pod." He pursed his lips. "To a particularly surly and rather insistent Dug."

Anakin accepted the bag, grinning broadly, the fight and its cause forgotten.

He ran up the steps to his door and burst through, Qui-Gon following silently. "Mom, Mom!" he cried out as she appeared to greet him. "Guess what! Qui-Gon sold the Pod! Look at all the money we have!"

He produced the leather pouch and dropped it into her hands, enjoying the startled look on her face. "Oh, my goodness!" she breathed softly, staring down at the bulging pouch. "Annie, that's wonderful!"

Her eyes lifted quickly to meet Qui-Gon's. The Jedi stepped forward, holding her gaze.

"Annie has been freed," he said.

The boy's eyes went wide. "What?"

Qui-Gon glanced down at him. "You are no longer a slave."

Shmi Skywalker stared at the Jedi in disbelief, her worn face rigid, her eyes mirroring her shock and disbelief.

"Mom? Did you hear that, Mom?" Anakin let out a whoop and jumped as high as he could manage. It wasn't possible! But he knew it was true, knew that it really was!

He managed to collect himself. "Was that part of the prize, or what?" he asked, grinning.

Qui-Gon grinned back. "Let's just say Watto learned an important lesson about gambling."

Shmi Skywalker was shaking her head, still stunned by the news, still working it through. But the sight of Anakin's face made everything come clear for her in an instant. She reached out to him and pressed him to her.

"Now you can make your dreams come true, Annie," she whispered, her face radiant as she touched his cheek. "You're free."

She released him and turned to Qui-Gon, her eyes bright and expectant. "Will you take him with you? Is he to become a Jedi?"

Anakin beamed at the suggestion, wheeling quickly on Qui-Gon,

waiting for his answer.

The Jedi Master hesitated. "Our meeting was not a coincidence. Nothing happens by accident. You are strong with the Force, Annie, but you may not be accepted by the Council."

Anakin heard what he wanted to hear, blocking away everything else, seeing the possibilities that had fueled his hopes and dreams for so long come alive in a single moment.

"A Jedi!" he gasped. "You mean I get to go with you in your starship and everything!"

And be with Padmé again! The thought struck him like a thunderbolt, wrapping him in such expectancy that it was all he could do to listen to what the Jedi Master said next.

Qui-Gon knelt before the boy, his face somber. "Anakin, training to be a Jedi will not be easy. It will be a challenge. And if you succeed, it will be a hard life."

Anakin shook his head quickly. "But it's what I want! It's what I've always dreamed about!" He looked quickly to his mother. "Can I go, Mom?"

But Qui-Gon drew him back with a touch. "This path has been placed before you, Annie. The choice to take it must be yours alone."

The man and the boy stared at each other. A mix of emotions roiled through Anakin, threatening to sweep him away, but at their forefront was the happiness he felt at finding the thing he wanted most in all the world within reach—to be a Jedi, to journey down the space lanes of the galaxy.

He glanced quickly at his mother, at her worn, accepting face, seeing in her eyes that in this, as in all things, she wanted what was best for him.

His gaze returned to Qui-Gon. "I want to go," he said.

"Then pack your things," the Jedi Master advised. "We haven't much time."

"Yippee!" the boy shouted, jumping up and down, anxious already to be on his way. He rushed to his mother and hugged her as hard as he could manage, then broke away for his bedroom.

He was almost to the doorway when he realized he had forgotten something. A chill swept through him as he wheeled back to Qui-Gon. "What about Mom?" he asked hurriedly, eyes darting from one to the other. "Is she free, too? You're coming, aren't you, Mom?"

Qui-Gon and his mother exchanged a worried glance, and he knew the answer before the Jedi spoke the words. "I tried to free your mother, Annie, but Watto wouldn't have it. Slaves give status and lend prestige to their owners here on Tatooine."

The boy felt his chest and throat tighten. "But the money from selling ..."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "It's not nearly enough."

There was a hushed silence, and then Shmi Skywalker came to her son and sat down in a chair next to him, taking both of his hands in hers and drawing him close. Her eyes were steady as she looked into his.

"Annie, my place is here," she said quietly. "My future is here. It is time for you to let go ... to let go of me. I cannot go with you."

The boy swallowed hard. "I want to stay with you, then. I don't want things to change."

She gave him an encouraging smile, her brow knitting. "You can't stop change any more than you can stop the suns from setting. Listen to your feelings, Annie. You know what's right."

Anakin Skywalker took a long, slow breath and dropped his gaze, his head lowering. Everything was coming apart inside, all the happiness melting away, all the expectancy fading. But then he felt his mother's hands tighten over his own, and in her touch he found the strength he needed to do what he knew he must.

Nevertheless, his eyes were brimming as he lifted his gaze once more. "I'm going to miss you so much, Mom," he whispered.

His mother nodded. "I love you, Annie." She released his hands. "Now, hurry."

Anakin gave her a quick, hard hug, and raced from the room, tears streaking his face.

Once within his own room, Anakin stood staring about in sudden bewilderment. He was leaving, and he did not know when he would be coming back. He had never been anywhere but here, never known anyone but the people of Mos Espa and those who came to trade with them. He had dreamed about other worlds and other lives, about becoming a pilot of a mainline ship, and about becoming a Jedi. But the impact of what it actually meant to be standing at the threshold of an embarkation to the life he had so often wished for was overwhelming.

He found himself thinking of the old spacer, telling him that he wouldn't be surprised at all if Anakin Skywalker became something more than a slave. He had wanted that more than anything, had hoped with all his heart for it to happen.

But he had never, ever considered the possibility he would have to leave his mother behind.

He wiped the tears from his eyes, fighting back new ones, hearing his mother's and Qui-Gon's voices from the other room.

"Thank you," his mother was saying softly.

"I will watch after him. You have my word." The Jedi's deep voice was warm and reassuring. "Will you be all right?"

Anakin couldn't hear her reply. But then she said, "He was in my life for such a short time ..."

She trailed off, distracted. Anakin forced himself to quit listening, and he began pulling clothes out and stuffing them into a backpack. He didn't have much, and it didn't take him long. He looked about for anything of importance he might have missed, and his eyes settled on C-3PO, sitting motionless on the workbench. He walked over to the protocol droid and switched him on. C-3PO cocked his head and looked at the boy blankly.

"Well, Threepio, I'm leaving," Anakin said solemnly. "I'm free. I'm going away, in a starship ..."

He didn't know what else to say. The droid cocked his head. "Well, Master Anakin, you are my maker, and I wish you well. Although I'd like it better if I were a little less naked."

The boy sighed and nodded. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to finish you, Threepio—to give you coverings and all. I'm going to miss working on you. You've been a great pal. I'll make sure Mom doesn't sell you or anything. Bye!"

He snatched up his backpack and rushed from the room, hearing C-3PO call after him plaintively, "Sell me?"

He said good-bye to his mother, braver now, more determined, and walked out the door with Qui-Gon, his course of action settled. He had gotten barely a dozen meters from his home when Kitster, who had trailed them back from the fight, came rushing up to him.

"Where are you going, Annie?" his friend asked doubtfully.

Anakin took a deep breath. "I've been freed, Kitster. I'm going away with Qui-Gon. On a spaceship."

Kitster's eyes went wide, and his mouth opened in a silent exclamation. Anakin fished in his pockets and came out with a handful of credits, which he shoved at his friend. "Here. These are for you."

Kitster's dark face looked down at the credits, then back up at Anakin. "Do you have to go, Annie? Do you have to? Can't you stay? Annie, you're a hero!"

Anakin swallowed hard. "I ..." He glanced past Kitster to his mother, still standing in the doorway looking after him, then down to where Qui-Gon was waiting. He shook his head. "I can't."

Kitster nodded. "Well."

"Well," Anakin repeated, looking at him.

"Thanks for everything, Annie," the other boy said. There were tears in his eyes as he accepted the credits. "You're my best friend."

Anakin bit his lip. "I won't forget."

He hugged Kitster impulsively, then broke away and raced toward

Qui-Gon. But before he reached him, he glanced back one more time at his mother. Seeing her standing in the doorway brought him about. He stood there momentarily, undecided, conflicting emotions tearing at him. Then his already shaky resolve collapsed altogether, and he raced back to her. By the time he reached her, he was crying freely.

"I can't do it, Mom," he whispered, clinging to her. "I just can't!"

He was shaking, wracked with sobs, disintegrating inside so quickly that all he could think about was holding on to her. Shmi let him do so for a moment, comforting him with her warmth, then backed him away.

She knelt before him, her worn face solemn. "Annie, remember when you climbed that dune in order to chase the banthas away so they wouldn't be shot? You were only five. Remember how you collapsed several times in the heat, exhausted, thinking you couldn't do it, that it was too hard?"

Anakin nodded, his face streaked with tears.

Shmi held his gaze. "This is one of those times when you have to do something you don't think you can do. But I know how strong you are, Annie. I know you can do this."

The boy swallowed his tears, thinking she was wrong, he was not strong at all, but knowing, too, she had decided he must go, even if he found it hard, even if he resisted.

"Will I ever see you again?" he asked in desperation, giving voice to the worst of his fears.

"What does your heart tell you?" she asked quietly.

Anakin shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know. Yes, I guess."

His mother nodded. "Then it will happen, Annie."

Anakin took a deep breath to steady himself. He had stopped crying now, and he wiped the dampness of his tears from his face.

"I will become a Jedi," he declared in a small voice. "And I will come back and free you, Mom. I promise."

"No matter where you are, my love will be with you," Shmi told him, her kind face bent close to his. "Now be brave, and don't look back."

"I love you, Mom," Anakin said.

She hugged him one final time, then turned him around so he was facing away from her. "Don't look back, Annie," she whispered.

She gave him a small push, and he strode determinedly away, shouldering his pack, keeping his eyes fixed on a point well past where Qui-Gon stood waiting. He walked toward that point without slowing, marching right past the Jedi Master, fighting back the tears that threatened to come yet again. It took only a few minutes, and his mother and his home were behind him.

They went to Watto's shop first, where the Toydarian had completed the forms necessary to assure Anakin's freedom. The transmitter that bound Anakin to his life of slavery was deactivated permanently. It would be removed surgically at a later date. Watto was still grumbling about the unfairness of things as they left him and went back out into the street.

From there, at Anakin's urging, they walked to Jira's fruit stand a short distance away. Anakin, much recovered from the trauma of leaving his mother, marched up to the old woman and put a handful of credits into her frail hands.

"I've been freed, Jira," he told her, a determined set to his jaw. "I'm going away. Use these for that cooling unit I promised you. Otherwise, I'll worry."

Jira looked at the credits in disbelief. She shook her white head. "Can I give you a hug?" she asked him softly. She reached out for him, drawing him against her thin body, her eyes closing as she held him. "I'll miss you, Annie," she said, releasing him. "There isn't a kinder boy in the galaxy. You be careful."

He left her in a rush, racing after Qui-Gon, who was already moving away, anxious to get going. They walked in silence down a series of side streets, the boy's eyes taking in familiar sights he would not soon see again, remembering his life here, saying good-bye.

He was lost in his own thoughts when Qui-Gon swung about with such swiftness it caught the boy completely by surprise. Down swept the Jedi's lightsaber in a brilliant arc, cutting through the shadows between two buildings, clashing momentarily with something made of metal that shattered in the wake of the weapon's passing.

Qui-Gon clicked off the lightsaber and knelt to inspect a cluster of metal parts still sparking and fizzing in the sand. The acrid smell of ozone and burning insulation hung in the dry air.

"What is it?" the boy asked, peering over his shoulder.

Qui-Gon rose. "Probe droid. Very unusual. Not like anything I've seen before." He glanced about worriedly, eyes sharp and bright as he cast up and down the street.

"Come on, Annie," he ordered, and they moved quickly away.

Qui-Gon Jinn took the boy out of Mos Espa swiftly, hurrying through the crowded streets to the less populated outskirts. All the while, his eyes and mind were searching, the former the landscape of Tatooine, the latter the landscape of the Force. His instincts had alerted him to the presence of the probe droid tracking them, and his Jedi training in the ways of the Force warned him now of something far more dangerous. He could feel a shifting in the balance of things that suggested an intrusion on the harmony that the Force required, a dark weight descending like a massive stone.

Once out on the desert, in the open, he picked up the pace. The Queen's transport came into view, a dark shape just ahead, a haven of safety. He heard Anakin call out to him, the boy working hard to keep up, but beginning to fall behind.

Glancing over his shoulder to give his response and offer encouragement, he caught sight of the speeder and its dark-cloaked rider bearing down on them.

"Drop, Anakin!" he shouted, wheeling about.

The boy threw himself facedown, flattening against the sand as the speeder whipped overhead, barely missing him as it bore down on Qui-Gon. The Jedi Master already had his lightsaber out, the blade activated, the weapon held before him in two hands. The speeder came at him, a saddle-shaped vehicle with no weapons in evidence, made to rely on quickness and maneuverability rather than firepower. It was like nothing the Jedi had ever seen, but vaguely reminiscent of something dead and gone.

Its rider rode out of the glare of the suns and was revealed. Bold markings of red and black covered a demonic face in strange, jagged patterns beneath a crown of stunted horns encircling its head. Man-shaped and humanoid, his slitted eyes and hooked teeth were nevertheless feral and predatory, and his howl was a hunter's challenge to his prey.

The primal scream had barely sounded before he was on top of Qui-Gon, wheeling the speeder aside deftly at the last moment, closing off its thruster, and leaping from the seat, all in one swift movement. He

carried a lightsaber of another make, and the weapon was cutting at the Jedi Master even before the attacker's feet had touched the ground. Qui-Gon, surprised by the other's quickness and ferocity, barely blocked the blow with his own weapon, the blades sliding apart with a harsh rasp. The attacker spun away in a whirl of dark clothing, then attacked anew, lightsaber slashing at his intended prey, face alight with a killing frenzy that promised no quarter.

Anakin was back on his feet, staring at them, clearly unable to decide what he should do. Fighting to hold his ground, Qui-Gon caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye.

"Annie! Get out of here!" he cried out.

His attacker closed with him again, forcing him back, striking at him from every angle. Even without knowing anything else, Qui-Gon knew this man was trained in the fighting arts of a Jedi, a skilled and dangerous adversary. Worse, he was younger, quicker, and stronger than Qui-Gon, and he was gaining ground rapidly. The Jedi Master blocked him again and again, but could not find an opening that would provide any chance of escape.

"Annie!" he screamed again, seeing the boy immobilized. "Get to the ship! Tell them to take off! Go, go!"

Hammering at the demonic-faced attacker with renewed determination, Qui-Gon Jinn saw the boy at last begin to run.

In a rush of emotion dominated by fear and doubt, Anakin Skywalker raced past the combatants for the Naboo spacecraft. It sat not three hundred meters away, metal skin gleaming dully in the afternoon sunlight. Its loading ramp was down, but there was no sign of its occupants. Anakin ran faster, sweat streaking his body. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he reached the ramp and bounded onto the ship.

Just inside the hatchway, he found Padmé and a dark-skinned man in uniform coming toward him. When Padmé caught sight of him, her eyes went wide.

"Qui-Gon's in trouble!" the boy blurted out, gasping for breath. "He says to take off! Now!"

The man stared, eyes questioning and suspicious. "Who are you?" he demanded.

But Padmé was already moving, seizing Anakin by the arm, pulling him toward the front of the spacecraft. "He's a friend," she answered, leading the way forward. "Hurry, Captain."

They rushed down the hallway into the cockpit, Anakin trying to tell the girl what had happened, his words tumbling over one another, his face flushed and anxious. Padmé moved him along in a nonsense way, nodding her understanding, telling him to hurry, taking

charge of everything.

When they reached the cockpit, they found two more men at work checking out the craft's control panel. They turned at the approach of Anakin and his companions. One wore a pilot's insignia on the breast of his jacket. The second, Anakin was quite certain from the cut of his hair and the look of his clothing, was another Jedi.

"Qui-Gon is in trouble," Padmé announced quickly.

"He says to take off," Anakin added in support.

The Jedi was on his feet at once. He was much younger than Qui-Gon, his face smooth, his eyes intense, his hair cut short save for a single braided pigtail that fell over his right shoulder. "Where is he?" he demanded. Then, without waiting for an answer, he wheeled back to the viewport and began scanning the empty flats.

"I don't see anything," the pilot said, peering over his shoulder.

"Over there!" The sharp eyes of the Jedi caught sight of movement just at the corner of the port. "Get us into the air and over there! Now! Fly low!"

The man called Ric threw himself into the pilot's seat, while the others, Anakin included, scrambled to find seats. The big repulsorlifts kicked in with a low growl, the rampway sealed, and the sleek transport rose and wheeled smoothly about.

"There," the Jedi breathed, pointing.

They could see Qui-Gon Jinn now, engaged in battle with the dark-garbed, demonic figure. The combatants surged back and forth across the flats, lightsabers flashing brightly with each blow struck, sand and grit swirling in all directions. Qui-Gon's long hair streamed out behind him in sharp contrast to the smooth horned head of his adversary. The pilot Ric took the spacecraft toward them quickly, skimming the ground barely higher than a speeder bike, coming in from behind the attacker. Anakin held his breath as they closed on the fighters. Ric's hand slid over the control that would lower the ramp, easing it forward carefully.

"Stand by," he ordered, freezing them all in place as he swung the ship about.

The combatants disappeared in a fresh swirl of sand and the glare of Tatooine's twin suns. All eyes shifted quickly to the viewscreens, searching desperately.

Then Qui-Gon appeared, leaping onto the lowered rampway of the transport, gaining purchase, one hand grasping a strut for support. Ric hissed in approval and fought to hold the spacecraft steady. But the horned attacker was already in pursuit, racing out of the haze and leaping onto the ramp as the ship began to rise. Balanced precariously against the sway of the ship, eyes flaring in rage, he fought to keep his footing.

Qui-Gon attacked at once, rushing the other man, closing with him at the edge of the ramp. They were twenty meters into the air by now, the pilot holding the spacecraft steady as he saw the combatants come to grips yet again, afraid to go higher while Qui-Gon was exposed. The Jedi Master and his adversary filled the viewscreen commanding the rampway entrance, faces tight with determination and streaked with sweat.

“Qui-Gon,” Anakin heard the second Jedi say quietly, desperately, watching the battle for just a moment more, then tearing his eyes away from the viewscreen and racing down the open corridor.

On the screen, Anakin watched Qui-Gon Jinn step back, level his lightsaber, and swing a powerful, two-handed blow at his attacker. The horned man blocked it, but only barely, and in the process lost his balance completely. The blow’s force swept him away, clear of the ramp and off into space. He dropped back toward the desert floor, landed in a crouch, and rose instantly to his feet. But the chase was over. He stood watching in frustration, yellow eyes aflame, as the ramp to the Queen’s transport closed and the spacecraft rocketed away.

Qui-Gon had barely managed to scramble up the rampway and into the interior of the ship before the hatch sealed and the Nubian began to accelerate. He lay on the cool metal floor of the entry, his clothing dusty and damp with his sweat, his body bruised and battered. He breathed deeply, waiting for his pounding heart to quiet. He had barely escaped with his life, and the thought was worrisome. His opponent was strong and had tested him severely. He was getting old, he decided, and he did not like the feeling.

Obi-Wan and Anakin rushed down the hallway to help him to his feet, and it was hard to tell which of them looked the more worried. It made him smile in spite of himself.

The boy spoke first. “Are you all right?” he asked, his young face mirroring his concern.

Qui-Gon nodded, brushing himself off. “I think so. That was a surprise I won’t soon forget.”

“What sort of creature was it?” Obi-Wan pressed, brow furrowed darkly. He wants to go back and pick up where I left off, Qui-Gon thought.

The Jedi Master shook his head. “I’m not sure. Whoever or whatever he was, he was trained in the Jedi arts. My guess is he was after the Queen.”

“Do you think he’ll follow us?” Anakin asked quickly.

“We’ll be safe enough once we’re in hyperspace,” Qui-Gon replied, sidestepping the question. “But I have no doubt he knows our

destination. If he found us once, he can find us again.”

The boy’s brow furrowed. “What are we going to do about it?”

At this point, Obi-Wan turned to stare at the boy, giving him a look that demanded in no uncertain terms, What do you mean, “we”? The boy caught the look and stared back at him, expressionless.

“We will be patient,” Qui-Gon advised, straightening himself, drawing their attention back to him. “Anakin Skywalker, meet Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

The boy beamed. “Pleased to meet you. Wow! You’re a Jedi Knight, too, aren’t you?”

The younger Jedi looked from the boy to Qui-Gon and rolled his eyes in despair.

From the entry, they made their way back down the hall to the cockpit, where Ric Olié was at work preparing the ship for the jump to hyperspace. Qui-Gon introduced Anakin to each of those present, then moved to the console to stand next to Ric.

“Ready,” the pilot announced over his shoulder, one eyebrow cocked expectantly.

Qui-Gon nodded. “Let’s hope the hyperdrive works and Watto doesn’t get the last laugh.”

Standing in a group behind Ric, the company watched silently as he fitted his hands to the controls and engaged the hyperdrive. There was a quick, sharp whine, and the stars that filled the viewport turned from silver pinpricks to long streamers as the ship streaked smoothly into hyperspace, leaving Tatooine behind.



Night lay over the planet of Naboo, but the silence of Theed exceeded even that normally experienced by those anticipating sleep. In the ornately appointed throne room that had once been the sole province of Queen Amidala, a strange collection of creatures gathered to witness the sentencing of Governor Sio Bibble. Trade Federation Viceroy Nute Gunray had convened the assembled, which consisted of Rune Haako and several other Neimoidians, the governor and a handful of officials in the Queen’s service, and a vast array of battle droids armed with blasters to keep the Naboo prisoners in line.

The Neimoidian was seated in a mechno-chair, a robotic walker that bore him from one part of the room to another, metal legs moving in response to a simple touch of his fingers. It carried him to Sio Bibble and the Naboo officials now, jointed armatures working in careful precision, allowing him to remain relaxed and comfortable as he took note of the fear in the eyes of the officials backing Bibble.

The governor was having none of it, however. Steadfast even now, he faced Gunray with anger and determination, his white head level,

his eyes challenging. The Neimoidian glared at him; Sio Bibble was becoming a source of irritation.

"When are you going to give up this pointless strike?" he snapped at the governor, leaning forward slightly to emphasize his displeasure.

"I will give up the strike, Viceroy, when the Queen—"

"Your Queen is lost; your people are starving!"

Bibble stiffened. "The Naboo will not be intimidated, not even at the cost of innocent lives—"

"Perhaps you should worry more about yourself, Governor!" Gunray cut him off sharply. "The odds are good that you are going to die much sooner than your people!" He was shaking with rage, and all at once his patience was exhausted. "Enough of this!" he exploded. "Take him away!"

The battle droids moved quickly, surrounding Sio Bibble, separating him from his colleagues.

"This invasion will gain you nothing!" the governor called back over his shoulder as he was dragged out. "We are a democracy! The people have decided, Viceroy! They will not live in tyranny ..."

The rest of what he said was lost as he disappeared through the doorway into the hall beyond. The Naboo officials filed out after him, silent and dejected.

The Neimoidian stared after them momentarily, then turned his attention to OOM-9 as the commander of his battle droids approached, metal face blank, voice devoid of inflection.

"My troops are in position to begin searching the swamps for the rumored underwater villages," OOM-9 reported. "They will not stay hidden for long."

Nute Gunray nodded and dismissed him with a wave of his hand. He thought nothing of these savages who occupied the swamps. They would be crushed in short order. For all intents and purposes, the planet was in his control.

He leaned back in the mechno-chair, a measure of calmness returning. All that remained was for the Sith Lords to bring him the Queen. Certainly they should have little difficulty in accomplishing that.

Nevertheless, he knew he wouldn't be happy until this business was over.

Aboard the Queen's transport, Anakin Skywalker sat shivering in a corner of the central chamber, trying to decide what he should do to get warm. Everyone else was asleep, and he had been asleep as well, but only for a short time, troubled by his dreams. He came awake to the silence and could not make himself move, paralyzed by more than simply the cold.

Jar Jar slept to one side, stretched out in a chair, head back, snoring loudly. Nothing kept the Gungan from sleeping. Or eating, for that matter. The boy smiled briefly. R2-D2 rested close by, upright and mostly silent, his lights blinking softly.

Anakin stared into the darkness, willing himself to move, to overcome his inertia. But his dreams haunted him still. He found himself thinking of his mother and home, and everything closed down inside. He missed her so much! He had thought it would get better once he was away, but it hadn't. Everything reminded him of her, and if he tried to close his eyes against those memories, he found her face waiting for him, suspended in the darkness of his thoughts, anxious and worn.

Tears came to his eyes, unbidden. Maybe he had made a mistake by coming. Maybe he should go home. Except he couldn't now. Maybe not ever again.

A slim figure entered the room, and Anakin watched the light of a viewscreen illuminate Padmé's soft face. Standing as if carved from stone, she clicked on a recording and stood watching the replay of Sio Bibble's plea to Queen Amidala to come home, to save her people from starvation, to help them in their time of need. She watched it all the way through, then shut it off again and stood staring at nothing, her head bent.

What was she doing?

Suddenly she seemed to sense him watching, and turned quickly toward where he crouched. Her beautiful face seemed tired and careworn as she approached and knelt beside him. He stiffened, trying desperately to stop from crying, but he couldn't hide either the tears or his shivering, and was left huddled before her, revealed.

"Are you all right, Annie?" she asked him softly.

"It's very cold," he managed to whisper.

She smiled and removed her heavy over jacket, wrapping it around his shoulders and tucking it about him. "You're from a warm planet, Annie. Space is cold."

Anakin nodded, pulling the jacket tighter. He brushed at his eyes. "You seem sad," he said.

If she saw the irony in his observation, she did not say so. "The Queen is worried. Her people are suffering, dying. She must convince the Senate to intervene, or else ..." She trailed off, unwilling to speak the words. "I'm not sure what will happen," she finished, her voice distant, her eyes sliding away from his to fix on something else.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen to me, either," he admitted worriedly. "I don't know if I'll ever see—"

He stopped, his throat tightening, the words fading away into silence. He took a deep breath, furrowed his brow, and reached into

his pocket.

“Here,” he said, “I made this for you. So you’d remember me. I carved it out of a japor snippet. Take it. It will bring you good fortune.”

He handed her an intricately carved wooden pendant. She studied it a moment, face lowered in shadow, then slipped it around her neck.

“It’s beautiful. But I don’t need this to remember you.” Her face lifted to his with a smile. “How could I forget my future husband?” She looked down at the pendant, fingering it thoughtfully. “Many things will change when we reach Coruscant, Annie. My caring for you will not be one of them.”

The boy nodded, swallowing. “I know. And I won’t stop caring for you, either. Only, I miss—”

His voice broke, and the tears sprang into his eyes once more.

“You miss your mother,” the girl finished quietly.

Anakin nodded, wiping at his face, unable to speak a word as Padmé Naberrie drew him against her and held him close.

Even before an off-world traveler was close enough to understand why, he could tell that Coruscant was different from other planets. Seasoned veterans were always amazed at how strange the planet looked from space, casting not the softer blue and white shades of planets still verdant and unspoiled, but an odd silvery glow that suggested the reflection of sunlight off metal.

The impression was not misleading. The days in which Coruscant could be viewed in any sort of natural state were dead and gone. The capital city had expanded over the centuries, building by building, until it wrapped the entire planet. Forests, mountains, bodies of water, and natural formations had been covered over. The atmosphere was filtered through oxygen regulators and purified by scrubbers, and water was gathered and stored in massive artificial aquifers. Native animals, birds, plants, and fish could be found in the museums or the climate-controlled indoor preserves. As Anakin Skywalker could clearly see from the viewport of Queen Amidala's slowly descending transport, Coruscant had become a planet of skyscrapers, their gleaming metal towers stretching skyward in a forest of spear points, an army of frozen giants blanketing the horizon in every direction.

The boy stared at the city-planet in awe, searching for a break in the endless forest of buildings, finding none. He glanced at Ric Olié in the pilot's seat, and Ric smiled.

"Coruscant, capital of the Republic, an entire planet evolved into one city." He winked. "A nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

"It's so huge!" the boy breathed softly.

They dropped into a landfall traffic lane and cruised slowly through the maze of buildings, sliding along the magnetic guidance lines that directed airborne vehicles. Ric explained how it worked to Anakin, who listened with half an ear, his attention still held captive by the vastness of the cityscape. In the background, the Jedi moved silently. Jar Jar crouched to one side, peering over the console through the viewport, clearly terrified by what he was seeing. Anakin knew the Gungan must long for the familiarity of his swamp home, just as the

boy was thinking how much better he liked the desert.

The Queen's transport slowed now, edging its way out of the traffic lane, onto a landing dock that floated near a cluster of huge buildings. Anakin peered down doubtfully. They were several hundred stories up, hundreds and hundreds of meters in the air. He tore his gaze away, swallowing hard.

The ship docked with a soft bump on the landing platform, its antigrav clamps locking in place. The Queen was waiting in the main corridor with her retinue of handmaidens, guards, and Captain Panaka. She nodded at Qui-Gon, indicating that he should lead the way. Giving Padmé a quick smile, Anakin followed close on the heels of the Jedi Master as he moved to the hatchway.

The hatch slid open, the loading ramp lowered, and the Jedi Knights, Anakin Skywalker, and Jar Jar Binks exited into the sunlight of Coruscant. The boy spent the first few minutes concentrating on not being overwhelmed, which became even more difficult once he was outside the ship. He kept his eyes on the rampway and Qui-Gon, not allowing himself to look around at first for fear he might walk right off into space.

Two men clothed in robes of office of the Republic Senate stood at the end of the ramp, flanked by a contingent of Republic guards. The Jedi approached the pair and bowed formally in greeting. Anakin and Jar Jar were quick to do the same, though only Anakin knew who they were bowing to and why.

Now Queen Amidala appeared, dressed in her black and gold robes with the feathered headpiece lending height and flow to her movements as she descended the ramp. Her handmaidens surrounded her, wrapped in their cloaks of crimson, faces barely visible in the shadows of their drawn hoods. Captain Panaka and his complement of Naboo guards escorted them.

Amidala stopped before the two men who waited, eyes shifting to the man with the kindly face and anxious eyes. Senator Palpatine, the Queen's emissary to the Republic Senate, bowed in welcome, hands clasped in the folds of his blue-green robes.

"It is a great relief to see you alive and well, Your Majesty," he offered with a smile, straightening once more. "May I present Supreme Chancellor Valorum."

Valorum was a tall, silver-haired man of indeterminate age, neither young nor old in appearance, but something of each, his bearing and voice strong, but his face and startling blue eyes tired and worried.

"Welcome, Your Highness," he said, a faint smile working its way onto his stern features. "It is an honor to finally meet you in person. I must relay to you how distressed everyone is over the current situation on Naboo. I have called for a special session of the Senate so

that you may present your request for relief.”

The Queen held his gaze without moving even a fraction of a centimeter, tall and regal in her robes of office, white-painted face as still and cool as ice. “I am grateful for your concern, Chancellor,” she said quietly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin recognized Padmé staring out at him from beneath her concealing hood. When he turned toward her, she gave him a wink, and he felt himself blush.

Palpatine had moved to the Queen’s side and was indicating an air shuttle that was awaiting them. “There is a question of procedure, but I feel confident we can overcome it,” he was saying, guiding her along the rampway, her handmaidens, Captain Panaka, and the Naboo guards in tow.

Anakin started to follow, Jar Jar at his side, then stopped as he saw that the Jedi were still standing with Supreme Chancellor Valorum. Anakin glanced back questioningly at Qui-Gon, not certain where he was supposed to go. The Queen and her retinue slowed in response, and Amidala motioned for Anakin and the Gungan to join them. Anakin looked again at Qui-Gon, who nodded wordlessly.

Moving into the air shuttle with the Queen, Anakin and Jar Jar settled quietly into place in the very back seat. Senator Palpatine glanced over his shoulder at them from the front, a look of skepticism crossing his face before he turned away again.

“Me not feelen too good ’bout being here, Annie,” the Gungan whispered doubtfully.

Anakin nodded and tightened his mouth determinedly.

They flew only a short distance to another cluster of buildings and another loading dock, this one clearly meant for shuttlecraft. There, they disembarked and were escorted by Palpatine to his quarters, a portion of which had been made ready for the Queen and her entourage. Anakin and Jar Jar were given a room and a chance to clean up and were left alone. After a time, they were collected by one of the handmaidens—not Padmé, Anakin noted with disappointment—and escorted to a waiting room situated outside what appeared to be Palpatine’s office.

“Wait here,” the handmaiden instructed, and disappeared back down the hallway.

The doors to the senator’s office were open, and the boy and the Gungan could see inside clearly. The Queen was present, dressed now in a gown of purple velvet, which was wrapped about her slim form in layers, the sleeves long and full, hanging gracefully from her slender arms. A fan-shaped crown with ornate beadwork and tassels rested upon her head. She was sitting in a chair, listening as Palpatine spoke to her. Her handmaidens stood to one side, crimson robes and hoods

drawn close about them. Anakin did not think either was Padmé. He wondered if he should try to find her instead of waiting here, but he did not know where to look.

The conversation within seemed decidedly one-sided, Senator Palpatine gesturing animatedly as he stalked the room, the Queen as still as stone. Anakin wished he could hear what was being said. He glanced at Jar Jar, and he could tell from the Gungan's restless eyes he was thinking the same thing.

When Captain Panaka walked past them and entered the room beyond, screening them from view for just a moment, Anakin rose impulsively. Motioning for Jar Jar to stay where he was, putting a finger to his lips in warning, he moved to one side of the doorway, pressing close. Through the crack between the open door and the jamb, he could just make out the voices of Palpatine and the Queen, muffled and indistinct.

Palpatine had stopped moving and was standing before the Queen, shaking his head. "The Republic is not what it once was. The Senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates who are only looking out for themselves and their home systems. There is no interest in the common good—no civility, only politics." He sighed wearily. "It's disgusting. I must be frank, Your Majesty. There is little chance the Senate will act on the invasion."

Amidala was silent a moment. "Chancellor Valorum seems to think there is hope."

"If I may say so, Your Majesty," the senator replied, his voice kind, but sad, "the chancellor has little real power. He is mired in baseless accusations of corruption. A manufactured scandal surrounds him. The bureaucrats are in charge now."

The Queen rose, standing tall and fixed before him. "What options do we have, Senator?"

Palpatine seemed to think on the matter for a moment. "Our best choice would be to push for the election of a stronger supreme chancellor—one who could take control of the bureaucrats, enforce the laws, and give us justice." He brushed back his thick hair, worrying his forehead with steepled fingers. "You could call for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum."

Amidala did not seem convinced. "Valorum has been our strongest supporter. Is there no other way?"

Palpatine stood before her. "Our only other choice would be to submit the matter to the courts—"

"There is no time for that," the Queen interrupted quickly, a hint of anger in her voice. "The courts take even longer to decide things than the Senate." She shifted purposefully, an edge sharpening her words further. "Our people are dying—more and more each day. We must do

something quickly. We must stop the Trade Federation before this gets any worse.”

Palpatine gave Amidala a stern look. “To be realistic about the matter, Your Highness, I believe we are going to have to accept Trade Federation control as an accomplished fact—for the time being, at least.”

The Queen shook her head slowly. “That is something I cannot do, Senator.”

They faced each other in the silence that followed, eyes locked, and Anakin Skywalker, hiding behind the door without, found himself wondering suddenly what had become of Qui-Gon Jinn.

Unlike other buildings in the vast sprawl of Coruscant, the Jedi Temple stood alone. A colossal pyramid with multiple spires rising skyward from its flat top, it sat apart from everything at the end of a broad promenade linking it with bulkier, sharper-edged towers in which solitude and mediation were less likely to be found. Within the Temple were housed the Jedi Knights and their students, the whole of the order engaged in contemplation and study of the Force, in codification of its dictates and mastery of its disciplines, and in training to serve the greater good it embodied.

The Jedi Council room dominated a central portion of the complex. The Council itself was in session, its doors closed, its proceedings hidden from the eyes and ears of all but fourteen people. Twelve of them—some human, some nonhuman—comprised the Council, a diverse and seasoned group who had gravitated to the order from both ends of the galaxy. The final two Jedi, who were guests of the Council this afternoon, were Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The seats of the twelve Council members formed a circle facing inward to where Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood, the former relating the events of the past few weeks, the latter a step behind his Master, listening attentively. The room was circular and domed, supported by graceful pillars spaced between broad windows open to the city and the light. The shape of the room and the Council seating reflected the Jedi belief in the equality of and interconnection between all things. In the world of the Jedi, the balance of life within the Force was the pathway to understanding and peace.

Qui-Gon studied the faces of his listeners as he spoke, each of them familiar to him. Most were Jedi Masters like himself, among them Yoda and Mace Windu, seniors in rank among those seated. They were more compliant in the ways of the Jedi order than he had ever been or would probably ever be.

He stood apart in the mosaic circle that formed a speaker’s platform for those who addressed the Council, his tall, broad form and deep

voice commanding the attention of those gathered, his blue eyes fixing them each in turn, constantly searching for a reaction to his words. They watched him carefully—stately Ki-Adi-Mundi, young and beautiful Adi Gallia, slender Depa Billaba, crested and marble-faced Even Piell, and all the others, each different and unique in appearance, each with something vital to offer as a representative of the Council.

Qui-Gon brought his eyes back to Mace Windu and Yoda, the ones he must convince, the ones most respected and powerful of those who sat in judgment.

“My conclusion,” he finished quietly, his story completed, “is that the one who attacked me on Tatooine is a Sith Lord.”

The silence that followed was palpable. Then there was a stirring of brown robes, a shifting of bodies and limbs. Glances were exchanged and murmurs of disbelief quickly voiced.

“A Sith Lord?” Mace Windu repeated with a growl, leaning forward. He was a strong, dark-skinned man with a shaved head and penetrating eyes, smooth-faced despite his years.

“Impossible!” Ki-Adi-Mundi snapped irritably, not bothering to hide his dismay at the suggestion. “The Sith have been gone for a millennium!”

Yoda shifted only slightly in his chair, a small and wizened presence in the company of much larger beings, his eyes gone to slits like a contented sand panther’s, his whiskery wrinkled face turned toward Qui-Gon’s thoughtfully.

“Threatened, the Republic is, if the Sith are involved,” he observed in his soft, gravelly voice.

The others began to mutter anew among themselves. Qui-Gon said nothing, waiting them out. They had believed the Sith destroyed. They had believed them consumed by their own lust for power. He could feel Obi-Wan shift uncomfortably at his shoulder, having trouble maintaining his silence.

Mace Windu leaned back heavily, his strong brow furrowing. “This is difficult to accept, Qui-Gon. I do not understand how the Sith could have returned without us knowing.”

“Hard to see, the dark side is,” Yoda said with a small snort. “Discover who this assassin is, we must.”

“Perhaps he will reveal himself again,” Ki-Adi-Mundi suggested with a nod to Qui-Gon.

“Yes,” Mace Windu agreed. “This attack was with purpose, that much is clear. The Queen is his target. Since he failed once, he may try again.”

Yoda lifted one skinny arm, pointing at Qui-Gon. “With this Naboo Queen, you must stay, Qui-Gon. Protect her, you must.”

The others murmured their approval, evidencing the confidence they felt in the Jedi Master's abilities. Still Qui-Gon said nothing.

"We shall use all our resources to unravel this mystery and discover the identity of your attacker," Mace Windu advised. One hand lifted in dismissal. "May the Force be with you, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"May the Force be with you," Yoda echoed.

Obi-Wan turned to leave. He stopped when Qui-Gon did not follow, but instead remained standing before the Council. Obi-Wan held his breath, knowing what was coming.

Yoda cocked his head questioningly. "More to say, have you, Qui-Gon Jinn?"

"With your permission, my Master," the Jedi replied, gaze steady. "I have encountered a vergence in the Force."

Yoda's eyes widened slightly. "A vergence, you say?"

"Located around a person?" Mace Windu asked quickly.

Qui-Gon nodded. "A boy. His cells have the highest concentration of midi-chlorians I have ever seen in a lifeform." He paused. "It is possible he was conceived by midi-chlorians."

There was a shocked silence this time. Qui-Gon Jinn was suggesting the impossible, that the boy was conceived not by human contact, but by the essence of all life, by the connectors to the Force itself, the midi-chlorians. Comprising collective consciousness and intelligence, the midi-chlorians formed the link between everything living and the Force.

But there was more that troubled the Jedi Council. There was a prophecy, so old its origins had long since been lost, that a chosen one would appear, imbued with an abundance of midi-chlorians, a being strong with the Force and destined to alter it forever.

It was Mace Windu who gave voice to the Council's thoughts. "You refer to the prophecy," he said quietly. "Of the one who will bring balance to the Force. You believe it is this boy."

Qui-Gon hesitated. "I don't presume—"

"But you do!" Yoda snapped challengingly. "Revealed, your opinion is, Qui-Gon!"

The Jedi Master took a deep breath. "I request the boy be tested."

Again, there was silence as the members of the Council exchanged glances, communicating without words.

Eyes shifted back to Qui-Gon. "To be trained as a Jedi, you request for him?" Yoda asked softly.

"Finding him was the will of the Force." Qui-Gon pressed ahead recklessly. "I have no doubt of it. There is too much happening here for it to be anything else."

Mace Windu held up one hand, bringing the debate to a close. "Bring him before us, then."

Yoda nodded somberly, eyes closing. "Tested, he will be."

* * *

"It is time to be going, Your Majesty," Senator Palpatine advised, moving to gather up a pile of data cards from his desk.

Queen Amidala rose, and Anakin hurried back to his seat beside Jar Jar, giving the Gungan another warning glance for good measure. Jar Jar looked hurt.

"Me not gonna tell dem," he protested.

A moment later Palpatine ushered the Queen and her handmaidens from his office and into the antechamber where the boy and the Gungan sat waiting. The senator went by them without a glance and was out the door immediately.

Queen Amidala slowed just a fraction as she passed Anakin.

"Why don't you come with us," the handmaiden Rabé said without looking at him, her voice a whisper. "This time you won't have to listen from behind a door."

Anakin and Jar Jar exchanged a startled, chagrined look, then rose and followed after.

While the others waited without, Queen Amidala, accompanied by her handmaidens, retreated to her chambers long enough to change into yet another ensemble, this one clearly meant to emphasize her status as leader of the Naboo. She emerged wearing a broad-shouldered cloak of crimson velvet trimmed with gold lace and a crown of woven cloth horns and tassels with a center plate of hammered gold. The gown and headdress lent both size and majesty, and she walked past a wondering Anakin and Jar Jar as if come down out of the clouds to mix with mortals, all cool grace and extraordinary beauty, aloof and untouchable.

Eirtaé and Rabé, the handmaidens who had accompanied her earlier, were present again, and they trailed the Queen in a silent glide, wrapped in their crimson hooded robes. Again Anakin looked for Padmé and did not find her.

"Please lead the way," Amidala requested of Palpatine, beckoning the boy, the Gungan, and Captain Panaka to accompany them.

They walked from Palpatine's quarters down a series of corridors that connected to other chambers and, eventually, to other buildings. The halls were empty of almost everyone, save for a scattering of Republic guards, and the company proceeded unchallenged. Anakin glanced around in awe at the tall ceilings and high windows, at the forest of buildings visible without, imagining what it would be like to live in a place like Coruscant.

When they reached the Senate chamber, he had cause to wonder anew.

The chamber had the look of an arena, circular and massive, with doors opening off exterior rampways at various levels above the main floor. At the center of the chamber a tall, slender column supported the supreme chancellor's platform, a broad, semienclosed area that allowed Valorum, who was already present, to sit or stand as he chose in the company of his vice chair and staff. All around the smooth interior walls of the arena, Senate boxes jutted from hangar bays off entry doors, some fixed in place while their senators conferred with staff and visitors, others floating just off their moorings. When a

senator requested permission to speak and was recognized by the chair, his box would float to the center of the arena, close to the supreme chancellor's podium, where it remained until the speech was concluded.

Anakin picked up on all this in a matter of seconds, trailing the Queen and Palpatine to the entry doors opening onto the Naboo Senate box, which sat waiting at its docking. Banners and curtains hung from the rounded ceiling in brilliant streamers, and indirect lighting glowed softly from every corner, brightening the rotunda's cavernous interior. Droids bustled along the exterior rampways, carrying messages from one delegation to the next, the movement of their metal bodies giving the chamber the look of a complex piece of machinery.

"If the Federation moves to defer the motion, Your Majesty," Senator Palpatine was saying to the Queen, his head bent close, his voice low and insistent, "I beg of you to ask for a resolution to end this session and call for the election of a new supreme chancellor."

Amidala did not look at him, continuing to advance toward the Naboo box. "I wish I had your confidence in this proposal, Senator," she replied quietly.

"You must force a new election for supreme chancellor," Palpatine pressed. "I promise you there are many who will support us. It is our best chance." He glanced toward the podium and Valorum. "Our only chance."

A murmur had risen from the assembled as they caught sight of Amidala standing at the entry to the Naboo box, robes of office flowing out behind her, head erect, face calm. If she heard the change in tenor of the level of conversation around her, she gave no sign. Her eyes shifted momentarily to Palpatine.

"You truly believe Chancellor Valorum will not bring our motion to a vote?" she asked quietly.

Palpatine shook his head, his high brow furrowing. "He is distracted. He is afraid. He will be of no help."

Rabé handed a small metal viewscreen to Anakin and Jar Jar and motioned for them to wait where they were. Stepping into the Senate box with Palpatine, Amidala was joined by her handmaidens and Panaka. Anakin was disappointed at not being included, but grateful when he discovered that the viewscreen Rabé had provided allowed him to see and hear what was happening in the Naboo box.

"She's going to ask the Senate for help, Jar Jar," he whispered, leaning over excitedly. "What do you think?"

The Gungan wrinkled up his billed mouth and shook his floppy-eared head. "Me think dis bombad, Annie. Too many peoples to be agreeing on da one thing."

The Naboo box detached from its docking and floated a short distance toward the supreme chancellor's podium, waiting for permission to advance all the way. Palpatine, Amidala, and the rest of the occupants were seated now, facing forward.

Valorum nodded his short-cropped white head in the direction of Palpatine. "The chair recognizes the senator from the sovereign system of Naboo."

The Naboo box glided to the center of the arena, and Palpatine rose to his feet, taking in the assemblage with a slow sweeping gaze that drew all eyes toward his.

"Supreme Chancellor, delegates of the Senate," his voice boomed, quieting the chamber. "A tragedy has occurred on my homeworld of Naboo. We have become caught up in a dispute, one of which you are all well aware. It began with a taxation of trade routes and has evolved into an oppressive and lawless occupation of a peaceful world. The Trade Federation bears responsibility for this injustice and must be made to answer ..."

A second box was rushing forward by now, this one bearing the markings of the Trade Federation and occupied by the Federation's senator, Lott Dod, and a handful of trade barons in attendance.

"This is outrageous!" the Trade Federation senator thundered, gesturing toward the podium and Valorum. A lean, wizened Neimoidian, he loomed out of the low-railed box like a willowy tree. "I object to Senator Palpatine's ridiculous assertions and ask that he be silenced at once!"

Valorum's white head swiveled briefly in Lott Dod's direction and one hand lifted. "The chair does not recognize the senator from the Trade Federation at this time." The supreme chancellor's voice was soft, but steady. "Return to your station."

Lott Dod looked as if he might say something more, but then he lowered himself back into his seat as his box slowly retreated.

"To state our allegations in full," Palpatine continued, "I present Queen Amidala, the recently elected ruler of the Naboo, to speak on our behalf."

He stepped aside, and Amidala rose to a light scattering of applause. Moving to the front of the box, she faced Valorum. "Honorable representatives of the Republic, distinguished delegates, and Supreme Chancellor Valorum. I come to you under the gravest of circumstances. In repudiation and violation of the laws of the Republic, the Naboo have been invaded and subjugated by force by droid armies of the Trade Federation—"

Lott Dod was on his feet again, voice raised angrily. "I object! This is nonsense! Where is the proof?" He did not wait for recognition as he turned to the chamber at large. "I recommend a commission be

sent to Naboo to ascertain the truth of these allegations.”

Valorum shook his head. “Overruled.”

Lott Dod sighed heavily and threw up his hands as if with that single word his life had become hopeless. “Your Honor, you cannot allow us to be condemned without granting our request for an impartial observation. It is against all the rules of procedure!”

He scanned the chamber for help, and there was a murmur of agreement from the delegates. A third box glided forward to join those of Naboo and the Trade Federation. The chair recognized Aks Moe, the senator from the planet of Malastare.

Stocky and slow moving, his three eyestalks waving gently, Aks Moe put the thick, heavy pads of his hands on his hips. “The senator from Malastare concurs with the honorable delegate from the Trade Federation.” His voice was thick and gnarly. “A commission, once requested, must be appointed, where there is a dispute of the sort we have encountered here. It is the law.”

Valorum hesitated. “The point is ...”

He trailed off uncertainly, left the sentence unfinished, and turned to confer with his vice chair, identified on the printed register as Mas Amedda. Amedda was of a species Anakin had never encountered, human in form, but with a head swollen by a pillow of cushioning tissue narrowing into a pair of tentacles that drooped over either shoulder and feelers that jutted from above the forehead. Together with their aides, the chair and vice chair engaged in a hurried discussion. Anakin and Jar Jar exchanged worried glances as Palpatine’s voice reached them through the handheld viewscreen’s tiny speaker.

“Enter the bureaucrats, the true rulers of the Republic, and on the payroll of the Trade Federation, I might add,” he was whispering to the Queen. Anakin could see their heads bent close. Palpatine’s tone was heavy. “This is where Chancellor Valorum’s strength will disappear.”

Valorum had moved back to the podium, a worn look on his face. “The point is conceded. Section 523A takes precedence here.” He nodded in the direction of the Naboo box. “Queen Amidala of the Naboo, will you defer your motion in order to allow a Senate commission to explore the validity of your accusations?”

Anakin could see the Queen stiffen in surprise, and when she spoke, her voice was edged with anger and determination.

“I will not defer,” she declared, eyes locked on Valorum. “I have come before you to resolve this attack on Naboo sovereignty now. I was not elected Queen to watch my people suffer and die while you discuss this invasion in committee. If the chancellor is not capable of action, I suggest new leadership is needed.” She paused. “I move for a

vote of no confidence in the supreme chancellor.”

Voices rose immediately in response, some in support, some in protest. Senators and spectators alike came to their feet, loud mutterings quickly building to shouts that echoed through the cavernous chamber. Valorum stood speechless at the podium, stunned and disbelieving. He stared at Amidala, his face etched in sudden shock as the impact of her words registered. Amidala faced him boldly, waiting.

Mas Amedda moved in front of Valorum, taking charge of the podium. “Order!” he bellowed, his strange head swelling. “We shall have order!”

The assembly quieted then, and the delegates reseated themselves, responding to Amedda’s command. Anakin noted that the Trade Federation box had maneuvered into position close beside the Naboo box. Lott Dod exchanged a quick glance with Palpatine, but neither spoke.

A new box floated to the center of the chamber, and the vice chair recognized Edcel Bar Gan, the senator from Roona.

“Roona seconds the motion for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum,” Bar Gan intoned in a sibilant voice.

Mas Amedda did not look pleased. “The motion has been seconded.”

He turned now to Valorum, speaking quickly to him, keeping his voice low and his words hidden behind his hand. Valorum looked at him uncomprehendingly, eyes distant and lost.

“There must be no delays,” Aks Moe of Malastare declared in a loud voice, drawing Mas Amedda’s attention back to him. “The motion is on the floor and must be voted on at once.”

Lott Dod was back on his feet. “I move the motion be sent to the procedures committee for further study—”

The Republic Senate erupted anew, chanting loudly, “Vote now! Vote now!” Mas Amedda was deep in discussion with Supreme Chancellor Valorum, hands on his shoulders as if to bring him back from wherever he’d gone by sheer force of determination.

“You see, Your Majesty, the tide is with us,” Anakin heard Palpatine announce quietly to the Queen. The boy’s eyes dropped to the viewscreen. “Valorum will be voted out, I assure you, and they will elect a new chancellor, a strong chancellor, one who will not let our tragedy be ignored ...”

Mas Amedda was back at the podium, addressing the chamber. “The supreme chancellor requests a recess.”

Shouts rose from the delegates, echoing across the chamber in waves as Valorum stared at Senator Palpatine and Queen Amidala, and even from where he stood watching now at the entry doors to the Naboo box, Anakin Skywalker could discern the look of betrayal

registered on the supreme chancellor's anguished face.

Less than an hour later, Anakin burst through the open doors of the Queen's antechamber in search of Padmé and found himself face-to-face with Amidala instead. The Queen was standing alone in the center of the room, her eyes directed toward him, her robed form radiant and solitary.

"Excuse me," Anakin said quickly. "Your Majesty."

She nodded silently, white face smooth and perfect.

"I was looking for Padmé," he continued, standing rooted in place just inside the doorway, undecided on whether to stay or go. He glanced around doubtfully. "Qui-Gon says he will take me before the Jedi Council. I wanted Padmé to know."

A small smile flitted across the Queen's painted lips. "Padmé isn't here, Anakin. I sent her on an errand."

"Oh," he said quietly.

"But I will give her your message."

The boy grinned. "Maybe I will become a Jedi Knight!" he exclaimed, unable to contain his excitement.

Amidala nodded. "Maybe you will."

"I think Padmé would like that."

"I think she would, too."

Anakin backed away. "I didn't mean to ..." He searched for the word and couldn't find it.

"Good luck, Anakin," the Queen said softly. "Do well."

He wheeled away with a broad smile and was out the door.

The day passed quickly for Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, and sunset found them standing together on a balcony outside the Jedi Temple overlooking Coruscant. Neither had said anything to the other for some time. They had collected Anakin Skywalker from Senator Palpatine's quarters following his return from the Republic Senate and brought him before the Council for examination. Now they were awaiting a decision.

As far as Obi-Wan was concerned, it was a foregone conclusion. The young Jedi was frustrated and embarrassed for his Master, who had clearly overstepped his bounds once again. Qui-Gon had been right in his suspicion that the boy was possessed of an inordinately high midi-chlorian count. Obi-Wan had run the test himself. But that alone was not enough to demonstrate Anakin was the chosen one. If there even was such a one, which Obi-Wan seriously doubted. There were hundreds of these old prophecies and legends, handed down through the centuries as a part of Jedi lore. In any case, Qui-Gon was relying on instinct once again, and instinct was useful only if born of the Force and not of emotion. Qui-Gon was insistent on championing the

causes of underdogs, of empathizing with creatures he found in some peculiar, inscrutable way he alone could comprehend significant in the scheme of things.

Obi-Wan studied his mentor surreptitiously. Why did he insist on pursuing these hopeless causes? The Council might find the boy possessed of more midi-chlorians than normal, but they would never accept him for Jedi training. The rules were clear and established, and the reasons supporting them were proven and unassailable. Training for the order after more than a year of life was doomed to fail. At nine years of age, Anakin Skywalker was simply too old.

But Qui-Gon would not let it go. He would brace the Council once again, and the result would be the same as it had been on so many other occasions: Qui-Gon would be denied and his stature as a Jedi Master would fall a little further.

Obi-Wan moved to where the older Jedi stood staring out at the endless horizon of skyscrapers. He stood close to him, silent for a moment longer before speaking.

"The boy will not pass the Council's tests, Master," he said softly, "and you know it. He is far too old."

Qui-Gon kept his gaze directed toward the sunset. "Anakin will become a Jedi, I promise you."

Obi-Wan sighed wearily. "Don't defy the Council, Master. Not again."

The older man seemed to go very still, perhaps even to stop breathing, before he turned to his protégé. "I will do what I must, Obi-Wan. Would you have me be any other way?"

"Master, you could be sitting on the Council by now if you would just follow the code. You deserve to be sitting on the Council." Obi-Wan's frustration surfaced in a burst of momentary anger. His eyes sought the other's and held them. "They will not go along with you this time."

Qui-Gon Jinn studied him a moment, then smiled. "You still have much to learn, my young Padawan."

Obi-Wan bit off his reply and looked away, thinking to himself that Qui-Gon was right, but that maybe this time he should consider taking his own advice.

Inside, Anakin Skywalker faced the Jedi Council, standing in the same place Qui-Gon Jinn had stood some hours earlier. He was nervous at first, brought into the chamber by Qui-Gon, then left alone with the twelve members of the Council. Standing in the mosaic circle and ringed by the silent assemblage, awestruck and uncertain of what was expected of him, he felt vulnerable and exposed. The eyes of the Jedi were distant as they viewed him, but he sensed they were looking

not past him, but inside.

They began to question him then, without preliminary introductions or explanations, without expending any effort at all to make him feel comfortable or welcome. He knew some of them by name, for Qui-Gon had described a few, and he was quick to put faces to names. They questioned him at great length, testing memory and knowledge, seeking insights at which he could only guess. They knew of his existence as a slave. They knew of his background on Tatooine, of his mother and his friends, of his Podracing, of Watto, of everything factual and past, of the order of his life.

Now Mace Windu was looking at a screen the boy could not see, and Anakin was giving names to images that flashed across its liquid surface. Images appeared in Anakin's mind with such speed he was reminded of the strange blur of desert and mountains whipping past his cockpit during a Podrace.

"A bantha. A hyperdrive. A proton blaster." The images whizzed through his mind as he named them off. "A Republic cruiser. A Rodian cup. A Hutt speeder."

The screen went blank, and Mace looked up at the boy.

"Good, good, young one," the wizened alien called Yoda praised. The sleepy eyes fixed on him, intent behind their lids. "How feel you?"

"Cold, sir," Anakin confessed.

"Afraid, are you?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir."

"Afraid to give up your life?" the dark one called Mace Windu asked, leaning forward slightly.

"I don't think so," he answered, then hesitated. Something about the answer didn't feel right.

Yoda blinked and his long ears cocked forward. "See through you, we can," he said quietly.

"Be mindful of your feelings," Mace Windu said.

The old one called Ki-Adi-Mundi stroked his beard. "Your thoughts dwell on your mother."

Anakin felt his stomach lurch at the mention of her. He bit his lip. "I miss her."

Yoda exchanged glances with several others on the Council. "Afraid to lose her, I think."

Anakin flushed. "What's that got to do with anything?" he asked defensively.

Yoda's sleepy eyes fixed on him. "Everything. To the dark side, fear leads. To anger and to hate. To suffering."

"I am not afraid!" the boy snapped irritably, anxious to leave this discussion and move on.

Yoda did not seem to hear him. “The deepest commitment, a Jedi must have. The most serious mind. Much fear in you, I sense, young one.”

Anakin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he spoke, his voice was calm again. “I am not afraid.”

Yoda studied him a moment. “Then continue, we will,” he said softly, and the examination resumed.

Jar Jar Binks of the Gungans and Queen Amidala of the Naboo stood together at a window that ran floor to ceiling in the Queen's chambers, looking out at the gleaming spires of Coruscant. An odd pairing at best, the Queen regal and composed, the Gungan awkward and jittery, they kept company in silence and watched the sunset color the sky a brilliant gold that reflected here and there off the flat metal and glass surfaces of the city in sudden, blinding explosions of light.

They had returned from the Republic Senate some hours ago, Jar Jar, Anakin, the Queen, and her handmaidens. They had come back principally because there seemed to be nothing else they could do to change the course of events regarding the future of Naboo. Senator Palpatine had stayed behind to politick with his colleagues over the selection of a new supreme chancellor, and Captain Panaka had remained with him, asked by the Queen to bring her news when there was any to offer. None had been forthcoming as yet. Now Anakin was gone as well, taken by Qui-Gon to the Jedi Temple where he was to meet with the Council, and no one had seen Padmé in some time.

So Jar Jar had rattled around in Palpatine's quarters rather like a stray kaadu until Amidala had taken pity on him and invited him to sit with her. She had gone into seclusion on her return, changing out of her Senate robes into a less imposing gold-trimmed black gown that emphasized how slender and small she really was. She wore an inverted, crescent-shaped crown with a beaded gold medallion arced down over her smooth forehead, but even so she stood several centimeters shorter than the Gungan.

She was clearly in pain, her eyes so sad and distant that it made Jar Jar want to comfort her. If it had been Annie or Padmé, he might have reached over and patted her on the head, but he was not about to try that with the Queen. There were no guards, but her handmaidens, Eirtaé and Rabé, cloaked in their crimson hooded robes and forever watchful, stood in waiting near the door, and he was certain there were guards somewhere close as well. He was careless of many things, oblivious to others, and in general given over to enjoying life in a haphazard way, but he was no fool.

Finally, though, he could ignore the situation no longer. He shuffled his feet and cleared his throat, drawing the Queen's attention. She turned, her white-painted face with red dots on each cheek and a red slash in the center of her lower lip doll-like and expressionless.

"Me wonder sometimes why da Guds invent pain," he offered sympathetically.

Amidala's cool gaze was steady and clear. "To motivate us, I imagine."

"Yous think yous people gonna die?" he asked, working his billed mouth around the bitter words as if he could taste them.

The Queen considered the question and shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Jar Jar."

"Gungans gonna get pasted, too, eh?"

"I hope not."

Jar Jar straightened, and a fierce pride brightened his eyes. "Gungans no die without a fight. We warriors! We gotta grand army!"

"An army?" she repeated, a hint of surprise in her soft voice.

"A grand army! Lotta Gungans. Dey come from all over. Dat why no swamp beings give us trubble. Too many Gungans. Gotta big energy shields, too. Nutten get through. Gotta energy balls, fly outta slings and splat electricity and goo. Bombad stuff. Gungans no ever give up to maccaneks or anyone!"

He paused, shrugged uncomfortably. "Dat why Naboo no like us, mebbe."

She was studying him closely now, her detached gaze replaced by something more intense, as if she were turning an unexpected thought over in her mind. She was preparing to speak to that thought, he believed, when Senator Palpatine and Captain Panaka strode through the doorway in a rush.

"Your Highness," Captain Panaka greeted, barely able to contain his excitement as both men bowed quickly and straightened. "Senator Palpatine has been nominated to succeed Valorum as supreme chancellor!"

Palpatine's smile was contained and deferential, and his voice carefully modulated as he spoke. "A surprise, to be sure, but a welcome one. I promise, Your Majesty, if I am elected, I will restore democracy to the Republic. I will put an end to the corruption that has plagued the Senate. The Trade Federation will lose its influence over the bureaucrats, and our people will be freed from the tyranny of this unlawful and onerous invasion—"

"Who else has been nominated?" Amidala asked abruptly, cutting him short.

"Bail Antilles of Alderaan and Aks Moe of Malastare," Panaka told her, avoiding Palpatine's eyes.

The senator was quick to recover from the unexpected interruption of his speech. "Your Majesty, I feel confident that our situation will generate strong support for us when the voting takes place tomorrow." He paused meaningfully. "I will be chancellor, I promise you."

The Queen did not look impressed. She moved past Jar Jar to the window and stared out at the lights of the city as they brightened with the fading of the sunset. "I fear by the time you have taken control of the bureaucrats, Senator, there will be nothing left of our cities, our people, or our way of life to salvage."

Palpatine looked taken aback. "I understand your concern, Your Majesty. Unfortunately, the Federation has seized possession of our planet. It will be nearly impossible to immediately dislodge them."

"Perhaps." Amidala turned from the window to face him. Her eyes were bright with anger and determination. "With the Senate in transition, there is nothing more I can do here." She walked to where he stood with Panaka. "Senator, this is your arena. I must return now to mine. I have decided to go back to Naboo. My place is with my people."

"Go back!" Palpatine was aghast, his pale face stricken. Panaka looked quickly from one to the other. "But, Your Majesty, be realistic! You will be in great danger! They will force you to sign the treaty!"

The Queen was calm and composed. "I will sign no treaty. My fate will be no different from that of my people." She turned to Panaka. "Captain!"

Panaka snapped to attention. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Ready my ship."

Palpatine stepped forward quickly to intercept her. "Please, Your Majesty. Stay here, where it is safe."

Amidala's voice was edged with iron. "No place is safe, if the Senate doesn't condemn this invasion. It is clear to me now that the Republic no longer functions." Her eyes locked on his. "If you win the election, Senator, I know you will do everything possible to stop the Federation. I pray you will find a way to restore sanity and compassion to the Republic."

She moved past him in a smooth, gliding motion and was out the door, her handmaidens and Panaka at her heels. Jar Jar Binks followed, shuffling after as unobtrusively as he could manage, glancing just once at Palpatine in passing.

He was surprised to catch the barest glimpse of a smile on the senator's shrewd face.

In the Temple of the Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Anakin Skywalker stood before the Council of twelve. Clustered together at the center of the speaker's platform, they faced the circle

of chairs in which the members of the Council were seated, and awaited their decision on the boy. Outside, the light was pale and wan as twilight replaced sunset, and night began its slow descent across the city.

"Finished, we are, with our examination of the boy," Yoda advised in his guttural, whispery voice. His eyes were lidded and sleepy, his pointed ears pricked forward. "Correct, you were, Qui-Gon."

Mace Windu nodded his concurrence, his dark, smooth face expressionless in the dim light. "His cells contain a very high concentration of midi-chlorians." There was emphasis on the word *very* as he spoke.

"The Force is strong in him," Ki-Adi-Mundi agreed.

Qui-Gon felt a rush of satisfaction on hearing the words, a vindication of his insistence on freeing the boy from his life on Tatooine and bringing him here. "He is to be trained, then," he declared in triumph.

There was an uncomfortable silence as the Council members looked from one to the other.

"No," Mace Windu said quietly. "He will not be trained."

Anakin's face crumpled, and there were tears in his eyes as he glanced quickly at Qui-Gon.

"No?" the Jedi Master repeated in disbelief, shocked almost speechless. He tried hard to ignore the I-told-you-so look on Obi-Wan's young face.

Mace Windu nodded, dark eyes steady. "He is too old. There is already too much anger in him."

Qui-Gon was incensed, but he held himself in check. This decision made no sense. It could not be allowed to stand. "He *is* the chosen one," he insisted vehemently. "You must see it!"

Yoda cocked his round head contemplatively. "Clouded, this boy's future is. Masked by his youth."

Qui-Gon searched the faces of the other members of the Jedi Council, but found no help. He straightened and nodded his acceptance of their decision. "Very well. I will train him then. I take Anakin Skywalker as my Padawan apprentice."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Obi-Wan stiffen in shock. He saw, as well, the sudden flicker of hope that crossed Anakin's face. He did not respond to either, keeping his gaze directed toward the Council.

"An apprentice, you already have, Qui-Gon," Yoda pointed out sharply. "Impossible, to take on a second."

"We forbid it," Mace Windu advised darkly.

"Obi-Wan is ready," Qui-Gon declared.

"I am!" his protégé agreed heatedly, trying unsuccessfully to mask

his surprise and disappointment in his mentor's unexpected decision. "I am ready to face the trials!"

Yoda's sleepy eyes shifted. "Ready so early, are you? What know you of ready?"

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged quick, hard looks, and the measure of their newfound antagonism was palpable. The breach in their relationship was widening so quickly it could no longer be mapped.

Qui-Gon took a deep breath and turned back to the Council. "Obi-Wan is headstrong, and he has much to learn still about the living Force, but he is capable. There is little more he will learn from me."

Yoda shook his wizened face. "Our own counsel we will keep on who is ready, Qui-Gon. More to learn, he has."

"Now is not the time for this," Mace Windu stated with finality. "The Senate will vote tomorrow for a new supreme chancellor. Queen Amidala returns home, we are advised, which will put pressure on the Federation and could widen the confrontation. Those responsible will be quick to act on these new events."

"Drawn out of hiding, her attackers will be," Yoda whispered.

"Events are moving too fast for distractions such as this," Ki-Adi-Mundi added.

Mace Windu took a quick look about at the others sitting on the Council, then turned once more to Qui-Gon. "Go with the Queen to Naboo and discover the identity of this dark warrior who attacked you, be it Sith or otherwise. That is the clue we need to unravel this mystery."

Yoda's nod was slow and brooked no argument. "Decided later, young Skywalker's fate will be."

Qui-Gon took a deep breath, filled with frustration and disappointment at the unexpected turn of events. Anakin would not be trained, even though he had offered to take the boy as his Padawan. Worse, he had offended Obi-Wan, not intentionally perhaps, but deeply nevertheless. The rift was not permanent, but it would take time for the younger man's pride to heal—time they could not afford.

He bowed his acquiescence to the Council. "I brought Anakin here; he must stay in my charge. He has nowhere else to go."

Mace Windu nodded. "He is your ward, Qui-Gon. We do not dispute that."

"But train him not!" Yoda admonished sharply. "Take him with you, but train him not!"

The words stung, the force behind them unmistakable. Qui-Gon flinched inwardly, but said nothing.

"Protect the Queen," Mace Windu added. "But do not intercede if it comes to war until we have the Senate's approval."

There was a long silence as the members of the Council regarded Qui-Gon Jinn gravely. He stood there, trying to think of something more to say, some other argument to offer. Outside, the last of the twilight faded into darkness, and the lights of the city began to blink on like watchful eyes.

“May the Force be with you,” Yoda said finally, signaling to the Jedi Master that the audience was over.

The Jedi and the boy, having been made aware of Amidala’s imminent departure for Naboo, went directly to the landing platform where the Queen’s transport was anchored to await her arrival. The shuttle ride over was marked by a strained silence between the Jedi and a discomfort in the boy he could not dispel. He looked down at his feet most of the time, wishing he could think of a way to stop Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan from being angry at each other.

When they disembarked from the shuttle at the landing platform, R2-D2 was already bustling about. The little droid beeped at Anakin cheerfully, then wandered over to the edge of the rampway to look down at the traffic. In doing so, he leaned out too far and tumbled over. Anakin gasped, but a second later the astromech droid reappeared, boosted back onto the rampway by his onboard jets. On hearing R2-D2’s ensuing flurry of chirps and whistles, the boy smiled in spite of himself.

At the head of the loading ramp, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi were engaged in a heated discussion. Wind whipped down the canyons of the city’s towering buildings, hiding their words from the boy. Carefully, he edged closer so that he could listen in.

“It is not disrespect, Master!” Obi-Wan was saying vehemently. “It is the truth!”

“From your point of view, perhaps.” Qui-Gon’s face was hard and tight with anger.

The younger Jedi’s voice dropped a notch. “The boy is dangerous. They all sense it. Why can’t you?”

“His fate is uncertain, but he is not dangerous,” Qui-Gon corrected sharply. “The Council will decide Anakin’s future. That should be enough for you.” He turned away dismissively. “Now get on board!”

Obi-Wan wheeled away and stalked up the ramp into the ship. R2-D2 followed, still whistling happily. Qui-Gon turned to Anakin, and the boy walked up to him.

“Master Qui-Gon,” he said uncomfortably, riddled with doubt and guilt over what was happening, “I don’t want to be a problem.”

Qui-Gon placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “You won’t be, Annie.” He glanced toward the ship, then knelt before the boy. “I’m not allowed to train you, so I want you to watch me instead and be

mindful of what you see. Always remember, your focus determines your reality.” He paused, eyes locked on Anakin. “Stay close to me, and you will be safe.”

The boy nodded his understanding. “Can I ask you something?” The Jedi Master nodded. “What are midi-chlorians?”

Wind whipped at Qui-Gon’s long hair, blowing strands of it across his strong face. “Midi-chlorians are microscopic life-forms that reside within the cells of all living things and communicate with the Force.”

“They live inside of me?” the boy asked.

“In your cells.” Qui-Gon paused. “We are symbionts with the midi-chlorians.”

“Sympi-what?”

“Symbionts. Life-forms living together for mutual advantage. Without the midi-chlorians, life could not exist, and we would have no knowledge of the Force. Our midi-chlorians continually speak to us, Annie, telling us the will of the Force.”

“They do?”

Qui-Gon cocked one eyebrow. “When you learn to quiet your mind, you will hear them speaking to you.”

Anakin thought about it a moment, then frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Qui-Gon smiled, and his eyes were warm and secretive. “With time and training, Annie, you will.”

A pair of shuttles eased up to the loading dock, and Queen Amidala, her handmaidens, Captain Panaka, and an escort of officers and guards disembarked. Last off the second shuttle was Jar Jar Binks. Amidala was wearing a purple velvet travel cloak that draped her body in soft folds and a gold-rimmed cowl that framed her smooth white face like a cameo portrait.

Qui-Gon rose and stood waiting beside Anakin as the Queen and her handmaidens approached.

“Your Highness,” Qui-Gon greeted with a deferential inclination of his head. “It will be our pleasure to continue to serve and protect you.”

Amidala nodded. “I welcome your help. Senator Palpatine fears the Federation means to destroy me.”

“I promise you, we will not let that happen,” the Jedi Master advised solemnly.

The Queen turned and with her handmaidens followed Panaka and the Naboo guards and officers into the transport.

Jar Jar hurried over and enveloped Anakin in a huge hug. “Weesa goen home, Annie!” he exclaimed with a grin, and Anakin Skywalker hugged him back.

Moments later they were all aboard, and the sleek transport had

lifted off, leaving Coruscant behind.

It was night in the Naboo capital city of Theed, the streets empty and silent save for the occasional passing of battle-droid patrols and the whisper of the wind. In the Queen's throne room, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako stood attentively before a hologram of Darth Sidious. The hologram filled the space at one end of the room, rising up before them menacingly.

The dark-cloaked figure at its center gestured. "The Queen is on her way to you," the Sith Lord intoned softly. "When she arrives, force her to sign the treaty."

There was a momentary pause as the Neimoidians exchanged worried looks. "Yes, my lord," Nute Gunray agreed reluctantly.

"Viceroy, is the planet secure?" The dark figure in the hologram shimmered with movement.

"Yes, my lord." Gunray was on firmer ground here. "We have taken the last pockets of resistance, consisting of mostly primitive life-forms. We are now in complete control."

The faceless speaker nodded. "Good. I will see to it that in the Senate things stay as they are. I am sending Darth Maul to join you. He will deal with the Jedi."

"Yes, my lord." The words were a litany.

The hologram and Darth Sidious faded away. The Neimoidians stood where they were, frozen in place.

"A Sith Lord, here with us?" Rune Haako whispered in disbelief, and this time Nute Gunray had nothing to say at all.

Aboard the Queen's transport, coming out of hyperspace and approaching the Naboo star system, Qui-Gon Jinn paused on his way to a meeting with the Queen to study Anakin Skywalker.

The boy stood at the pilot's console next to Ric Olié. The Naboo pilot was bent forward over the controls, pointing each one out in turn and explaining its function. Anakin was absorbing the information with astonishing quickness, brow furrowed, eyes intense, concentration total.

"And that one?" The boy pointed.

"The forward stabilizer." Ric Olié glanced up at him expectantly, waiting.

"And those control the pitch?" Anakin indicated a bank of levers by the pilot's right hand.

Ric Olié's weathered face broke into a grin. "You catch on pretty quick."

As quick as anyone he had ever encountered, Qui-Gon Jinn thought. That was the reason Anakin was so special. It gave evidence of his high midi-chlorian count. It suggested anew that he was the chosen one.

The Jedi Master sighed. Why could the Council not accept that this was so? Why were they so afraid of taking a chance on the boy, when the signs were so clear?

Qui-Gon found himself frustrated all over again. He understood their thinking. It was bad that Anakin was so old, but not fatal to his chances. What troubled them was not his age, but the conflict they sensed within him. Anakin was wrestling with his parentage, with his separation from his mother, his friends, and his home. Especially his mother. He was old enough to appreciate what might happen, and the result was an uncertainty that worked within him like a caged animal seeking to break free. The Jedi Council knew that it could not tame that uncertainty from without, that it could be mastered only from within. They believed Anakin Skywalker too old for this, his thinking and his beliefs too settled to be safely reshaped. He was vulnerable to his inner conflict, and the dark side would be quick to take advantage

of this.

Qui-Gon shook his head, staring over at the boy from the back of the cockpit. Yes, there were risks in accepting him as an apprentice. But few things of worth were accomplished in life without risk. The Jedi order was founded on strict adherence to established procedures in the raising and educating of young Jedi, but there were exceptions to all things, even this. That the Jedi Council was refusing even to consider that this was an instance in which an exception should be made was intolerable.

Still, he must keep faith, he knew. He must believe. The decision not to train Anakin would be reconsidered on their return and reversed. If the Council did not embrace the boy's training as a Jedi voluntarily, then it would be up to Qui-Gon to find a way to make it do so.

He turned away then and walked from the cabin to the passageways beyond and descended one level to the Queen's chambers. The others she had called together for this meeting were already present when he arrived. Obi-Wan gave him a brief, neutral nod of recognition, standing next to a glowering Captain Panaka. Jar Jar Binks hugged the wall to one side, apparently trying to disappear into it. Amidala sat on her shipboard throne on a raised dais set against one wall, two of her handmaidens, Rabé and Eirtaé, flanking her. Her white-painted face was composed and her gaze cool as it met his own, but there was fire in the words she spoke next.

"When we land on Naboo," she advised the Jedi Master after he had bowed and taken up a position next to Panaka, "it is my intention to act on this invasion at once. My people have suffered enough."

Panaka could barely contain himself, his dark face tight with anger. "When we *land*, Your Highness, the Trade Federation will arrest you and force you to sign their treaty!"

Qui-Gon nodded thoughtfully, curious as to the Queen's thinking. "I agree. I'm not sure what you hope to accomplish by this."

Amidala might have been carved from stone. "The Naboo are going to take back what is ours."

"There are only twelve of us!" Panaka snapped, unable to keep silent. "Your Highness," he added belatedly. "We have no army!"

Her eyes shifted to Qui-Gon. "The Jedi cannot fight a war for you, Your Highness," he advised. "We can only protect you."

She let her gaze drift from them to settle on Jar Jar. The Gungan was studying his toes. "Jar Jar Binks!" she called.

Jar Jar, clearly caught off guard, stiffened. "Me, Your Highness?"

"Yes," Amidala of the Naboo affirmed. "I have need of your help."

Deep in the Naboo swamps, at the edge of the lake that bored

downward to the Gungan capital city of Otoh Gunga, the fugitives from the Queen's transport were grouped at the water's edge, waiting for the return of Jar Jar Binks. Amidala and her handmaidens, the Jedi Knights, Captain Panaka, Anakin, R2-D2, Ric Olié and several other pilots, and a handful of Naboo guards clustered uneasily in the misty silence. It was safe to say that even now no one but the Queen knew exactly what it was she was attempting to do. All she had been willing to reveal to those in a position to inquire was that she wished to make contact with the Gungan people and Jar Jar would be her emissary. She had insisted on landing in the swamp, even after both Panaka and the Jedi had advised against it.

A single battleship orbited the planet, all that remained of the Trade Federation blockade. Housed within was the control station responsible for directing the droid army that occupied Naboo. When Panaka wondered aloud at the absence of the other battleships, Qui-Gon pointed out rather dryly that you don't need a blockade once you control the port.

Anakin, standing apart from the others with R2-D2, studied the group surreptitiously. Jar Jar had been gone a long time, and everyone but the Queen was growing restless. She stood wrapped in her soft robes, silent and implacable in the midst of her handmaidens. Padmé, Eirtaé, and Rabé had changed from their crimson hooded cloaks into more functional trousers, tunics, boots, and long-waisted overcoats, and there were blasters strapped to their waists. The boy had never seen Padmé like this, and he found himself wondering how good a fighter she was.

As if realizing he was thinking of her, Padmé broke away from the others and came over to him.

"How are you, Annie?" she asked quietly, her kind eyes locking on his.

He shrugged. "Okay. I've missed you."

"It's good to see you again. I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to talk with you before, but I've been very busy."

They hadn't spoken more than a few words to each other since leaving Tatooine, and Anakin hadn't even seen Padmé since their departure from Coruscant. It had bothered him, but he'd kept it to himself.

"I didn't—I—" he stuttered, looking down at his boots. "They decided not to make me a Jedi."

He recounted the story for her, detailing the events surrounding his appearance before the Jedi Council. Padmé listened intently, then touched his cheek with her cool fingers. "They can change their minds, Annie. Don't give up hope."

She bent close then. "I have something to tell you. The Queen has

made a painful, difficult decision—a decision that will change everything for the Naboo. We are a peaceful people, and we do not believe in war. But sometimes there is no choice. Either you adapt or you die. The Queen understands this. She has decided to take an aggressive posture with the Trade Federation army. The Naboo are going to fight to regain their freedom.”

“Will there be a battle?” he asked quickly, trying unsuccessfully to hide his excitement.

She nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“Will you be involved?” he pressed.

She smiled sadly. “Annie, I don’t have a choice.”

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood together some distance away. The Jedi still weren’t speaking to each other, or only barely so. Their words on the journey out from Coruscant had been reserved almost exclusively for others. The hard feelings caused by Qui-Gon’s bid to train Anakin did not soften. The boy had tried to talk to Obi-Wan once aboard the Queen’s ship, just to say he was sorry this had happened, but the younger Jedi had brushed him off.

Now, though, Obi-Wan was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the situation. He had been close with Qui-Gon for too long to let a momentary disagreement put an end to twenty-odd years of friendship. Qui-Gon was like a father to him, the only father he knew. He was angry that the Jedi Master would dismiss him so abruptly in favor of the boy, but he realized, too, the depth of Qui-Gon’s passion when he believed in something. Training this boy to be a Jedi was a cause Qui-Gon championed as he had championed no other in Obi-Wan’s memory. He did not do so to slight his protégé. He did so because he believed in the boy’s destiny.

Obi-Wan understood. Who could say? Perhaps this time Qui-Gon was right. Perhaps Anakin Skywalker’s training was a cause worth fighting for.

“I’ve been thinking,” Qui-Gon announced suddenly, keeping his voice low, his eyes directed toward the others. “We are treading on dangerous ground. If the Queen intends to fight a war, we cannot become involved. Not even in her efforts to persuade the Gungans to join with the Naboo against the Federation, if that is what she intends by coming here. The Jedi have no authority to take sides.”

“But we do have authority to protect the Queen,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

Qui-Gon’s eyes shifted to find his. “It is a fine line we walk, then.”

“Master,” Obi-Wan said, facing him now. “I behaved badly on Coruscant, and I am embarrassed. I meant no disrespect to you. I do not wish to be difficult in the matter of the boy.”

“Nor have you been,” the older Jedi replied, a faint smile appearing. “You have been honest with me. Honesty is never wrong. I did not lie when I told the Council you were ready. You are. I have taught you all I can. You will be a great Jedi, my young Padawan. You will make me proud.”

They gripped hands impulsively, and as quickly as that the breach that had opened between them was closed.

Moments later, a dark shape broke the surface of the water with a splash, and Jar Jar Binks climbed from the lake, shaking water from his amphibious skin onto the assembled. Long ears dripping, billed mouth shedding water like a duck’s, he shook his head worriedly.

“Tis nobody dere! Deys all gone!” His eyestalks swiveled. “Some kinda fight, deys have. Maccaneks, mebbe. Very bombad. Otoh Gunga empty. All Gungans gone. All gone.”

“Do you think they have been taken to the camps?” Panaka asked quickly, glancing around at the group.

“More likely they were wiped out,” Obi-Wan offered in disgust.

But Jar Jar shook his head. “Me no think so. Gungans too smart. Go into hiding. When dey in trubble, go to sacred place. Maccaneks no find dem dere.”

Qui-Gon stepped forward. “Sacred place?” he repeated. “Can you take us there, Jar Jar?”

The Gungan sighed heavily, as if to say “Here we go again,” and beckoned for them to follow.

They traversed the swamp for some time, first skirting the lake, then plunging deep into a forest of massive trees and tall grasses, following a water-screened pathway that connected a series of knolls. Somewhere in the distance, Trade Federation STAPs buzzed and whined as a search for the transport fugitives commenced in earnest. Jar Jar glanced about apprehensively as he picked his way through the mire, but did not slow.

Finally, they emerged in a clearing of marshy grasses and stands of trees with roots tangled so thickly they formed what appeared to be an impassable hedge. Jar Jar stopped, sniffed the air speculatively, and nodded. “Dissen it.”

He lifted his head and made a strange chittering noise though his billed mouth, the sound echoing eerily in the silence. The group waited, eyes searching the misty gloom.

Suddenly Captain Tarpals and a scouting party of Gungans riding kaadu emerged from the haze, electropoles and energy spears held at the ready.

“Heydey ho, Cap’n Tarpals,” Jar Jar greeted cheerfully.

“Binks!” the Gungan leader exclaimed in disbelief. “Notta gain!”

Jar Jar shrugged nonchalantly. "We come ta see da Boss!"

Tarpals rolled his eyes. "Ouch time, Binks. Ouch time for alla yous, mebbe."

Herding them together, Gungans on kaadu providing a perimeter escort on all sides, Tarpals led them deeper into the swamp. The canopy formed by the limbs of the trees became so thick that the sky and the sun almost disappeared. Bits and pieces of statuary began to surface, crumbling stone facades and plinths sinking in the mire. Vines snaked their way across the broken remains, dropping down from limbs that twisted and wound together in vast wooden nets.

Pushing through a high stand of saw grass, they arrived in a clearing filled with Gungan refugees—men, women, and children of all ages and descriptions, huddled together on a broad, dry rise, many with their possessions gathered around them. Tarpals led the company past the refugees to where the ruins of what had once been a grand temple were being slowly reclaimed by the swamp. Platforms and stairs were all that remained intact, the columns and ceilings having long ago collapsed and broken apart. The massive heads and limbs of stone statues poked out of the mire, fingers clutching weapons and eyes staring sightlessly into space.

At the far end of the ruins, Boss Nass appeared, lumbering out of shadows with several more of the Gungan council to stand atop a stone head partially submerged in the water. Amidala and her retinue approached to within hailing distance over a network of causeways and islands.

"Jar Jar Binks, whadda yous doen back?" Boss Nass rumbled angrily. "Yous suppose ta take dese outlanders and no come back! Yous pay good dis time!" The fleshy head swiveled. "Who yous bring here ta da Gungan sacred place?"

The Queen stepped forward at once, white face lifting. "I am Amidala, Queen of the Naboo."

"Naboo!" Boss Nass thundered. "No like da Naboo! Yous bring da maccanecks! Dey bust up our homes! Dey drive us all out!" A heavy arm lifted, pointing at the Queen. "Yous all bombad! Yous all die, mebbe!"

Anakin noticed suddenly that they were completely surrounded by Gungans, some on kaadu, some on foot, all with electropoles, energy spears, and some sort of throwing device. Captain Panaka and the Naboo guards were looking around nervously, hands straying toward their blasters. The Jedi flanked the Queen and her handmaidens, but their arms hung loose at their sides.

"We wish to form an alliance with you," Amidala tried again.

"We no form nutten wit da Naboo!" Boss Nass roared angrily.

Abruptly Padmé detached herself from the others and stepped in

front of the Queen. "You did well, Sabé. But I will have to do this myself," she said quietly, and turned to face Boss Nass.

"Who dis?" the head Gungan snapped.

Standing next to Anakin, R2-D2 beeped softly in recognition. The droid had figured it out first.

Padmé straightened. "I am Queen Amidala," she announced in a loud, clear voice. "Sabé serves from time to time as my decoy, my loyal bodyguard. I am sorry for my deception, but given the circumstances, I am sure you can understand." She turned to the Jedi, her eyes shifting momentarily to find Anakin. "Gentlemen, I apologize for misleading you."

Her eyes returned quickly to Boss Nass, who was frowning suspiciously, clearly not understanding any of what was happening. "Although our people do not always agree, Your Honor," she continued, her voice softening, "we have always lived in peace. Until now. The Trade Federation, with its tanks and its 'maccaneks,' has destroyed all that we have worked so hard to build. The Gungans are in hiding, and the Naboo have been imprisoned in camps. If we do not act quickly, all that we value will be lost forever."

She stretched out her hands. "I ask you to help us, Your Honor." She paused. "No, I beg you to help us."

She dropped abruptly to one knee in front of the astonished leader of the Gungans. There was an audible gasp of surprise from the Naboo. "We are your humble servants, Your Honor," Padmé said so that all could hear. "Our fate is in your hands. Please help us."

She motioned, and one by one, her handmaidens, Panaka, and the Naboo pilots and guards dropped to their knees beside her. Anakin and the Jedi were the last to join them. Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin saw Jar Jar standing virtually alone in their midst, staring around in wonderment and shock.

For a moment, no one said anything. Then a slow, deep rumble of laughter rose out of the throat of Boss Nass. "Ho, ho, ho! Me like dis! Dis good! Yous no think yous greater den da Gungans!"

The head Gungan came forward, reaching out with one hand. "Yous stand, Queen Amidoll. Yous talk wit me, okay? Mebbe we gonna be friends after all!"

The senior Sith Lord appeared in a shimmer of robes and shadows as his protégé and the Neimoidians walked slowly down the corridor leading from the throne room back to the plaza.

"We have sent out patrols," Nute Gunray said, concluding his report to the ominous figure in the projection. "We have already located their starship in the swamp. It won't be long until we have them in hand, my lord."

Darth Sidious was silent. For a moment Nute Gunray was afraid he hadn't been heard. "This is an unexpected move for the Queen," the Sith Lord said at last, his voice so low it could barely be heard. "It is too aggressive. Lord Maul, be mindful."

"Yes, Master," the other Sith growled softly, yellow eyes gleaming.

"Be patient," Darth Sidious purred, head lowered in cowed shadows, hands folded into black robes. "Let them make the first move."

In silence, Darth Maul and the Neimoidians continued on as the hologram slowly faded away.

Boss Nass was as mercurial as he was large, and his change of attitude toward the Naboo was dramatic. Once he decided that the Queen did not consider herself his superior, that she was in fact quite sincere in her plea for Gungan help, he was quick to come around. The fact that his dislike of the battle droids was every bit as strong as hers didn't hurt matters, of course. Perhaps he had been hasty in his belief that the "maccaneks" wouldn't find the Gungans in the swamps. Otoh Gunga had been attacked at daybreak two days earlier and its inhabitants driven from their homes. Boss Nass was not about to sit still for that. If a plan could be put together to drive the invaders out, the Gungan army would do its part to help.

He took Amidala and her companions out of the swamp to the edge of the grass plains that ran south to the Naboo capital city of Theed. Any attack would be mounted from here, and the Queen had come to the Gungans with a very specific plan of attack in mind.

The first step in that plan involved sending Captain Panaka on a reconnaissance of the city.

As they stood looking out from the misty confines of the swamp toward the open grasslands, waiting for Panaka's return, Boss Nass trundled up to Jar Jar.

"Yous doen grand, Jar Jar Binks!" he rumbled, wrapping a meaty arm around the slender Gungan's shoulders. "Yous bring da Naboo and da Gungan together! Tis very brave thing."

Jar Jar shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed. "Ah, yous no go sayen dat. Tis nутten."

"No, yous grand warrior!" Boss Nass declared, squeezing the air out of his compatriot with a massive hug.

"No, no, no," the other persisted bashfully.

"So," Boss Nass concluded brightly, "we make yous bombad general in da Gungan army!"

"What?" Jar Jar exclaimed in dismay. "General? Me? No, no, no!" he gasped, and his eyes rolled up, his tongue fell out, and he fainted dead away.

Padmé was in conference with the Jedi and the Gungan generals, to

whose number Jar Jar Binks had just been added, so Anakin, at loose ends, had wandered over to keep company with the Gungan sentries who were keeping lookout for Panaka. The Gungans patrolled the swamp perimeter on kaadu and kept watch through macrobinoculars from treetops and the remains of ancient statuary, making certain Federation scouting parties didn't come up on them unexpectedly. Anakin stood at the base of a temple column, still trying to come to terms with Padmé's revelation. Everyone had been surprised, of course, but no one more than he. He wasn't sure how he felt about her now, knowing she wasn't just a girl, but a Queen. He had declared he would marry her someday, believing it so, but how could someone who had been a slave all his life marry a Queen? He wanted to talk to her, but there wasn't any opportunity for that here.

He supposed things wouldn't be the same after this, but he wished they could. He liked her as much now as he had before, and to tell the truth he didn't care if she was a Queen or not.

He glanced over at the girl and the Jedi Knights and thought how different things were here than they had been on Tatooine. Nothing had worked out the way he had hoped for any of them, and it remained to be seen if leaving his mother and home to come with them was a good idea after all.

The Gungan lookout standing atop a piece of statuary above him gave a grunt. "Dey comen," he called down, peering out into the grasslands through his macrobinoculars.

Anakin gave a yell in response and raced over to Padmé, the Jedi, and the Gungan generals. "They're back!" he shouted.

Everyone turned to watch a squad of four speeders skim over the flats and pull to a stop in the concealing shadow of the swamp. Captain Panaka and several dozen Naboo soldiers, officers, and starfighter pilots jumped down. Panaka made his way directly to the Queen.

"I think we got through without being detected, Your Highness," he advised quickly, brushing the dust from his clothing.

"What is the situation?" she asked as the others crowded close to them.

Panaka shook his head. "Most of our people are in the detention camps. A few hundred officers and guards have formed an underground movement to resist the invasion. I've brought as many of the leaders as I could find."

"Good." Padmé nodded appreciatively toward Boss Nass. "The Gungans have a larger army than we imagined."

"Very, very bombad!" the Gungan chief rumbled.

Panaka exhaled wearily. "You'll need it. The Federation army is much larger than we thought, too. And stronger." He gave the Queen

a considering look. "In my opinion, this isn't a battle we can win, Your Highness."

Standing at the edge of the circle, Jar Jar Binks looked down at Anakin and rolled his eyes despairingly.

But Padmé was undeterred. "I don't intend to win it, Captain. The battle is a diversion. We need the Gungans to draw the droid army away from Theed, so we can infiltrate the palace and capture the Neimoidian viceroy. The Trade Federation cannot function without its head. Neimoidians don't think for themselves. Without the viceroy to command them, they will cease to be a threat."

She waited for them to consider her plan, eyes fixing automatically on Qui-Gon Jinn. "What do you think, Master Jedi?" she asked.

"It is a well-conceived plan," Qui-Gon acknowledged. "It appears to be your best possible move, Your Highness, although there is great risk. Even with the droid army in the field, the viceroy will be well guarded. And many of the Gungans may be killed."

Boss Nass snorted derisively. "They bombad guns no get through our shields! We ready to fight!"

Jar Jar gave Anakin another eye roll, but this time Boss Nass saw him do so and gave his new general a hard warning look.

Padmé was thinking. "We could reduce the Gungan casualties by securing the main hangar and sending our pilots to knock out their orbiting control ship. Without the control ship to signal them, the droid army can't function at all."

Everyone nodded in agreement. "But if the viceroy should escape, Your Highness," Obi-Wan pointed out darkly, "he will return with another droid army, and you'll be no better off than you are now. Whatever else happens, you must capture him."

"Indeed, we must," Padmé agreed. "Everything depends on it. Cut off the head, and the serpent dies. Without the viceroy, the Trade Federation collapses."

They moved on to other matters then, beginning a detailed discussion of battle tactics and command responsibilities. Anakin stood listening for a moment, then eased his way close to Qui-Gon and tugged on his sleeve.

"What about me?" he asked quietly.

The Jedi Master put a hand on the boy's head and smiled. "You stay close to me, Annie, do as I say, and you'll be safe."

Keeping safe wasn't quite what the boy had in mind, but he let the matter drop, satisfied that as long as he was close to Qui-Gon, he wouldn't be far from the action.

In the Theed palace throne room, Darth Sidious loomed in hologram form before Darth Maul, Battle Droid Commander OOM-9, and the

Neimoidians. Smooth and silky, his voice oozed through the shadowy ether.

“Our young Queen surprises me,” he whispered thoughtfully, hidden within his dark robes. “She is more foolish than I thought.”

“We are sending all available troops to meet this army of hers,” Nute Gunray offered quickly. “It appears to be assembling at the edge of the swamp. Primitives, my lord—nothing better. We do not expect much resistance.”

“I am increasing security at all Naboo detention camps,” OOM-9 intoned.

Darth Maul glared at nothing, then shook his horned head. “I feel there is more to this than what we know, my Master. The two Jedi may be using the Queen for their own purposes.”

“The Jedi cannot become involved,” Darth Sidious soothed, hands spreading in a placating motion. “They can only protect the Queen. Even Qui-Gon Jinn cannot break that covenant. This will work to our advantage.”

Darth Maul snorted, anxious to get on with it.

“I have your approval to proceed, then, my lord?” Nute Gunray asked hesitantly, avoiding the younger Sith’s mad eyes.

“Proceed,” Darth Sidious ordered softly. “Wipe them out, Viceroy. All of them.”

By midday, with the sun overhead in a cloudless sky and the wind died away to nothing, the grasslands lying south of Theed between the Naboo capital city and the Gungan swamp lay empty and still. Heat rose off the grasslands in a soft shimmer, and it was so quiet that from a hundred meters away the chirp of birds and the buzz of insects could be heard as if they were settled close by.

Then the Trade Federation army's bubble-nosed transports and armor-wrapped tanks roared onto the rolling meadows, skimming the tall grasses in gleaming waves of bright metal.

It was quiet in the swamps as well, the perpetual twilight hushed and expectant beneath the vast canopy of limbs and vines, the surface of the mire as smooth and unbroken as glass, the reeds and rushes motionless in the windless air. Here and there a water bug jumped soundlessly from place to place, stirring puddles to life in the wake of its passing, bending blades of grass like springboards. Birds swooped and banked in bright flashes of color, darting from limb to limb. Small animals crept from cover to drink and feed, eyes bright, noses twitching, senses alert.

Then the Gungan army surfaced in a rippling of murky water and a stream of bubbles, lop-eared heads popping up like corks, first one, then another, and finally hundreds and eventually thousands.

Both on the plain and in the swamp, the small animals raced back into hiding, the birds took wing, and the insects went to ground.

Astride their kaadu, the Gungans rode from their concealment with armor strapped to their amphibious bodies and weapons held at the ready. They carried long-hafted energy spears and metal-handled ball slings for longdistance fighting and energy shields for close combat. The kaadu shook themselves as they reached dry ground, shedding the swamp water from their smooth skins, eyes picking out the solid patches of ground as their riders urged them on. Numbers swelling as they reached the fringes of the swamp, the Gungans began to form up in ranks of riders that stretched away as far as the eye could see.

As the first wave rode clear, the swamp boiled anew with the appearance of fambaa—huge, four-legged lizards with long necks and

tails and massive, scaly bodies. The fambaa bore shield generators atop their broad backs, machines that when linked would activate a force field to protect the Gungan soldiers against Trade Federation weaponry. The fambaa lumbered heavily beneath their loads, necks craning from side to side as their drivers prodded them impatiently.

Jar Jar Binks rode with them at the head of his new command, wondering what it was he was supposed to do. Mostly, he believed, he was supposed to stay out of the way. Certainly the other generals and even his own subordinate officers had made it clear that this was what they preferred. Boss Nass might think it clever to make him a general in the Gungan army, but the career officers found it less amusing. General Ceel, who was commander in-chief, grunted sourly at Jar Jar, on being informed of his new position, and told him to set a good example for his people and die well.

Jar Jar had responded to all this by keeping a low profile until the march out of the swamp began, and then he had assumed his required position at the head of his command. He had gotten barely a hundred meters after emerging from concealment when he had fallen off his kaadu. No one had bothered to stop to help him climb back on, and so now he was riding somewhere in the middle of his troops.

"Tis very bombad," he kept whispering to himself as he rode with the others through the marshy haze.

Slowly, steadily, the Gungan army cleared the tangle of the swamps and moved out onto the open grasslands where the Trade Federation army was already waiting.

Anakin Skywalker hunkered down in the shadows of a building directly across from the main hangar of the Naboo starfleet in the city of Theed. It was quiet here as well, the bulk of the battle droids dispatched to the field to deal with the Gungan army, the remainder scattered throughout the city in patrols and on perimeter watch. Nevertheless, tanks crowded the plaza fronting the hangar complex, and a strong contingent of battle droids warding the Naboo fleet. Seizing control of the starfighters was not going to be easy.

Anakin glanced over at those with him. Padmé, dressed as a handmaiden, crouched with Eirtaé beside the Jedi, waiting for Captain Panaka's command to get into position on the other side of the square. Sabé, the decoy Queen, and her handmaidens wore battle dress, loose-fitting and durable, with blasters strapped to their sides. R2-D2 blinked silently from behind them in the company of twenty-odd Naboo officers, guards, and pilots, all armed and ready. It seemed to the boy like a pathetically small number of fighters to carry the day, but it was all they had.

At least Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were talking again. They had begun

doing so on the journey in from the swamps, a few words here, a few there, exchanging comments guardedly, testing the waters. Anakin had listened carefully, more attuned to the nuances of their conversation than others could be, hearing in the inflection of their voices more than simply the words spoken. After a time, when the words had healed enough of the breach that they felt comfortable again, there were smiles, brief and almost sad, but clear in their purpose. The Jedi were old friends and their relationship that of father and son. They did not want to toss it all away over a single disagreement. Anakin was thankful for that—especially since the disagreement in question was over him.

Padmé had spoken to him as well, joining him for a few moments as they approached the city through the forests east, her smile banishing all his doubts and fears in a moment's time.

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner," she said, apologizing for hiding her identity. "I know it was a surprise."

"It's okay," he said, shrugging bravely.

"I guess knowing I'm a Queen makes you feel differently about me, doesn't it?" she asked.

"I guess, but that's okay. Just so you still like me. Because I still like you." He looked over at her hopefully.

"Of course, Annie. Telling you who I really am doesn't mean my feelings for you have changed. I was the same person before, whether you knew the truth about me or not."

He thought about it a moment. "I suppose." He brightened. "So I guess my feelings for you shouldn't be any different now either."

She moved away, smiling broadly back at him, and just at that moment he felt ten meters tall.

So now he was at peace with himself about the Jedi and Padmé, but was beset with new concerns. What if something happened to them during the fight ahead? What if they were hurt or even ... He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. Nothing bad would happen to them, that was all. He wouldn't let it. He glanced at them, kneeling in silence at the edge of the plaza, and promised himself he would keep them safe no matter what. That would be his job. His mouth tightened with determination as he made his pledge.

"Once we get inside, Annie, you find a safe place to hide until this is over," Qui-Gon advised suddenly, bending close, almost as if he could read the boy's mind.

"Sure," Anakin promised.

"And stay there," the Jedi Master added firmly.

Across the way, Panaka and his contingent of fighters were in position now, placing the tanks and battle droids in a crossfire with Padmé's group. Padmé produced a small glow rod and flashed a coded

signal to Panaka across the square.

All around Anakin, weapons slid free of holsters and fastenings, and safeties were released.

Then Panaka's fighters opened up on the battle droids, blasters shattering their metal bodies in a hail of laser fire. Other droids wheeled about in response and began exchanging fire, drawn toward the source of the conflict and away from Padmé's group.

Qui-Gon came to his feet. "Stay close," Qui-Gon whispered to him.

A moment later, the boy was running with the Jedi, Padmé, Eirtaé, R2-D2, and their Naboo contingent of soldiers and pilots toward the open door of the hangar.

Jar Jar sat tall astride his kaadu, having regained his composure and resumed his position at the head of his troop. The Gungan army was spread out all along the grasslands on either side of where he rode for as far as the eye could see. Birdlike, the kaadu picked their way through the tall grasses, heads dipping, Gungan riders swaying with the motion. The Gungans wore leather and metal headgear and body armor, with small, circular shields strapped at their hips and tri-plate energy packs for abetting the force field jutting like metal feathers from their saddle backs. The fambaa, bearing the shield generators, were spaced evenly down their lines to achieve maximum protection once the generators were activated. Like tanks, the massive lizards lumbered amidst the more nimble kaadu, and the grasslands shook with the weight of their passing.

At the head of the army rode General Ceel and his command unit, the flags of Otoh Gunga and the other Gungan cities borne in their wake at the end of long poles.

The army crested a rise, a great, rolling wave of dark bodies, and on a hand signal from General Ceel, drew to a halt.

Across a long, shallow depression, its position secure on the next ridge over, the Trade Federation army waited. Lines of STAPs and tanks formed the first rank, spread out over a distance of more than a kilometer, armor plating and weapons gleaming in the midday sun. Buttressing the smaller vehicles were the huge Federation transports, massive bodies hovering just off the ground, bulbous-nose gates closed and pointed forward toward the Gungans. Battle droids controlled tanks and STAPs, faceless and empty metal shells impervious to pain, devoid of emotion, and programmed to fight until destroyed.

Jar Jar Binks stared at the droid army in awe. There was not a living creature in sight, not one made of flesh and blood, not one that would react to the terrible roil of battle as the Gungans would. It made his skin crawl to think of what that meant.

The fambaa were in place now, and General Ceel activated the

shield generators. The big turbines hummed to life, and a pulse of red light arced from a generator atop one fambaa to a dish atop the next, the beam widening and broadening as it grew in size to encompass the whole of the Gungan army until each soldier and kaadu was safely enfolded. The coloring of the protective light changed from red to gold, shimmering like a mirage on a desert. The effect was to make it appear as if the Gungan army was underwater, as if it had been swallowed in a bright, clear sea.

The Federation was quick to test the shield's effectiveness. On a signal from Droid Commander OOM-9, who in turn was responding to a command from the deep-space control center, the tanks opened fire, their laser cannons sending round after round into the covering. Searing beams hammered into the shield and shattered ineffectively against the liquid energy surface, unable to penetrate.

Within their protective covering, the Gungans waited patiently, weapons ready, trusting the strength of their shield. Astride his kaadu, Jar Jar Binks flinched and squirmed fearfully, muttering various prayers to ward off the destruction he was certain would find him otherwise. Relentlessly, the Trade Federation cannons continued their attack, streamers of energy lancing from their barrel mounts, pounding at the covering. The flash and burn and explosion were blinding and deafening, but the Gungans held their ground.

Finally, the Trade Federation guns went still. Try as they might, they could not break through the Gungan energy shield. Within their protective canopy, the Gungans cheered and brandished their weapons triumphantly.

But now the tanks and STAPs withdrew, and the massive transports advanced to the fore. The rounded-nose doors opened, widening to reveal a cluster of racks mounted within. The racks rolled forward on long rails, revealing row after row of battle droids neatly folded up and suspended on hooks. When the racks were fully extended, they began to lower and separate outward, filling the open space in front of the transports with thousands of droids.

Positioned at the forefront of their army, General Ceel and his Gungan commanders exchanged worried looks.

Now the racks began to release the battle droids, who unfolded in unison into standing positions, arms and legs extended, bodies straight. Metal hands reached back over shoulders to pull free the blaster rifles with which each unit was equipped.

On command from OOM-9, the entire array of battle droids began to march toward the Gungan army, bright metal ranks filling the grasslands from horizon to horizon.

The Gungan shield wall was designed to deflect large, slow-moving objects of density and mass such as artillery vehicles and small, fast-

moving objects generating extreme heat such as projectiles from weapons fire. But it would not deflect small, slow-moving droids—even massed together in such numbers as they were here. Jar Jar Binks began to wish he were somewhere else, thinking that as mighty as the Gungan army was, it was dwarfed by the metal machine that marched against it now.

But the Gungans had come prepared for battle, and they were not so deterred by the number of their enemies that they were ready to quit. All up and down their lines, Gungans activated their energy spears and straight-handled slings, arming them for the attack. At the foot of the rise on which they waited, the front ranks of the battle droids reached the perimeter of the energy field and began to pass through. The shield had no effect on them. Lifting their blasters to their shoulders, they began to fire.

Amid a wail of great, curved battle horns, the Gungans retaliated. A shower of spears rained down on the advancing droids, shafts and points exploding on impact, ripping metal limbs and torsos apart. Energy balls flung from the slings followed, inflicting further damage. Mortars dumped their loads in the center of the droid ranks, opening huge gaps in the attack. The battle droids reeled and slowed, then regained momentum and came on, hundreds more taking the place of those who had fallen, marching mindlessly through the protective shield and into the range of the Gungan weapons.

At the center of his command unit, General Ceel urged his warriors on, tightening his defensive lines in front of the fambaa and the shield generators to protect them from harm, knowing that if the force field came down, the Trade Federation's tanks would strike the Gungans as well.

Battle-droid ranks, metal parts reflecting sun and fire, and Gungan lines, orange-skinned and supple, closed to do battle.

Resisting the temptation to shut his eyes against what he knew was coming, Jar Jar Binks kicked his heels into the flanks of his kaadu and charged ahead with the rest of his command.

In the relative seclusion of the Theed palace throne room, in a place they had believed safely removed from any real danger, Nute Gunray and Rune Haako stared at a giant viewscreen and its rapidly changing images of the battle taking place in the main hangar. The Jedi Knights were inside the complex, accompanied by Naboo soldiers and pilots, their lightsabers wreaking havoc on the battle droids who tried to stop them.

"How did they get into the city?" Rune Haako whispered in dismay.

Nute Gunray shook his head. "I don't know. I thought the battle was going to take place far from here." His eyes were wide and staring.

“This is too close!”

They turned as one when Darth Maul stalked into the room, bearing a long-handled lightsaber. Yellow eyes gleamed out of the Sith’s red and black tattooed face, and his dark cloak billowed out behind him.

Nute Gunray and Rune Haako backed away instinctively, neither of them wanting to get in the way. “Lord Maul,” Gunray greeted, inclining his head briefly.

Darth Maul glanced at him disdainfully. “I told you there was more to this than was apparent!” His eyes had a wild, manic look to them. “The Jedi have come to Theed for a reason, Viceroy. They have a plan of their own for defeating us.”

“A plan?” the Neimoidian asked worriedly.

“One that will fail, I assure you.” The striped face glinted wickedly in the light. “I have waited a long time for this. I have trained for it endlessly. The Jedi will regret their decision to return here.”

There was an edge to his rough voice that was frightening. The Sith was anxious for this confrontation, his body coiled and ready, his hands flexing about his weapon. The Neimoidians did not envy those he sought.

“Wait here until I return,” he ordered abruptly, and swept past them.

“Where are you going?” Nute Gunray demanded frantically as the Sith Lord crossed toward the speeder docks.

“Where do you think I’m going, Viceroy?” the other sneered. “I’m going to the main hangar to rid you of the Jedi once and for all.”



Anakin Skywalker rushed through the open doors of the main hangar after the Jedi and Padmé, with R2-D2 and the rest of the Naboo freedom fighters on their heels. Battle droids turned to confront them, but lightsabers and blasters cut apart the foremost before the others even knew what was happening. The droids rallied in response, summoning help from without, but Panaka and his men had those in the plaza already occupied, and for a moment the Jedi and the Naboo were in control.

Mindful of Qui-Gon's admonition, Anakin ducked beneath the fuselage of the closest starfighter, laser bolts searing the air around him in brilliant bursts of fire.

"Get to your ships!" Padmé shouted at her pilots, leading the contingent of Naboo soldiers under her command in pursuit of the retreating battle droids.

Ducking and crouching, she fired her blaster with quick, precise moves, bringing down droid after droid, her charges finding their targets with unerring accuracy. The Jedi fought just ahead of her, blocking droid laser fire with their lightsabers, striking down those unfortunate enough to cross their path. But it was Padmé on whom Anakin's eyes were riveted, for not only had he never seen this side of her, he hadn't even known it existed. She moved with the skill and training of a seasoned fighter, no longer seeming in any way a young girl, becoming instead a deadly combatant.

He thought suddenly of his dream of Padmé leading an army in another time and place, and suddenly the dream didn't seem so impossible.

Pilots from the attacking force and R2 units freed from storage in the hangar lockers moved quickly to board the Naboo fighters, scattering swiftly through the hail of blaster fire. Clambering aboard their starships, pilots in the cockpits, R2 units in their sockets, they switched on their control panels and ignited their engines. A roar of power filled the massive hangar, drowning out the sound of laser fire, building to an ear-shattering crescendo. One by one, the fighters began to levitate and shift into position for takeoff.

A Naboo pilot rushed past Anakin and climbed into the fighter he was crouched behind. "Better get out of here, kid!" she called down from the cockpit. "Find yourself a new hiding place! You're about to lose this one!"

Anakin darted away in a low crouch, droid blaster fire crisscrossing the air above him, centering on the departing ships. The fighter he had abandoned began to lift off, wheeling toward the open hangar doors. Other ships were already speeding away into the blue, engines booming.

As the Jedi and the Naboo fighters continued to push the droid hangar watch steadily back, Anakin searched hastily for a new hiding place. Then he heard R2-D2 whistle at him from another fighter close at hand, the little droid already ensconced in his socket, domed head rotating, control lights flashing. The boy raced across the hangar floor littered with the shattered bodies of battle droids, laser fire whizzing all about him, and jumped into the cockpit with a gasp of relief.

Peering out from the safety of his bolt-hole, he watched the last pair of Naboo fighters rocket out of the hangar. The first got free, but the second was hit by tank fire and knocked sideways so that it pinwheeled into the ground and exploded in a ball of flame. Anakin winced and crouched lower.

Now Panaka, Sabé, and the Naboo soldiers who had been engaged in combat outside the hangar burst through the doors as well, firing as they came. Caught in a crossfire, the remaining battle droids were quickly overwhelmed and destroyed. There was a hurried conference between the Jedi, Padmé, and Panaka, and then the entire Naboo fighting force began to move toward an exit in the hangar that took them directly past Anakin's hiding place.

"Hey, where are you going?" the boy asked, popping his head out of the cockpit as they passed.

"Annie, you stay there!" Qui-Gon ordered, motioning him back down. His long hair was wild and his face intense. "Stay right where you are!"

The boy ignored him, standing up instead. "No, I want to go with you and Padmé!"

"Stay in that cockpit!" Qui-Gon snapped in a tone of voice that brooked no argument.

Anakin froze, undecided, as the contingent hurried past him toward the exit door, weapons at the ready. He did not want to be left behind. He had no intention of letting Qui-Gon and Padmé go on without him, especially since he could do nothing to help them if he was stuck here in this empty hangar.

He was still wrestling with the matter when the entire group slowed in front of the exit door. A dark-cloaked figure stepped through the

opening to confront them. Anakin's breath caught in his throat. It was the Sith Lord who had attacked them on the Tatooine desert, a dangerous adversary, Qui-Gon had advised the boy later, an enemy of the Jedi Knights. He stepped out of the shadows like a large sand panther, his red and black tattooed face a terrifying mask, his yellow eyes bright with anticipation and rage.

Blocking the way out, he stood waiting for the Jedi and their charges, a long-handled lightsaber held before him. Captain Panaka and his fighters backed away at once. Then, on command from Qui-Gon, Padmé and her handmaidens gave ground as well, though less quickly and with more obvious reluctance.

Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi stood alone in the Sith Lord's path. Together, they removed their capes and ignited their lightsabers. Their horned antagonist stripped away his cloak as well, then lifted the long-handled lightsaber he bore as if offering it for inspection. Gleaming blade fire jutted from both ends of the handle, revealing a deadly, dual-blade weapon. A smile crossed the bearer's feral face as he swung the weapon before him in an idle, casual gesture, beckoning the Jedi ahead.

Spreading out to either side, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan slowly advanced to meet him.

On the plains south of Theed, the battle between the Trade Federation and the Gungan armies was fully joined. Gungans and battle droids were locked in close combat, a tangle of amphibious bodies and metal shells. The shield generators still held the Trade Federation tanks at bay. Only the droids had broken through, but there were many more of them than there were of the Gungans, and General Ceel had committed all his reserves to the struggle.

Jar Jar Binks fought at the center of the maelstrom, wielding a broken energy spear as a club, wheeling and stumbling this way and that, careening wildly. Caught up in the wiring of a battle droid he had decapitated, he could not manage to free himself from the debris, and so was dragging the headless torso after him. The droid, still operating on autopilot despite the loss of its head, was firing its blaster continuously as Jar Jar whipped it this way and that, finding droid targets more often than Gungans, cutting a swath through their faltering ranks.

"Tis bombad! Tis bombad!" The Gungan shouted out the refrain over and over as he swung his shattered spear and fought to get free of his headless companion.

When at last he broke away and was able to smash the remains of the droid into the ground, he was left standing in a wide open space that everyone on both sides was trying desperately to avoid. For a

terrifying moment, Jar Jar literally did not know which way to turn.

Then a cry went up from the Gungans closest. "Jar Jar Binks! Jar Jar Binks!"

"Who, me?" the befuddled Gungan gasped.

Inspired troops rallied around him and pressed ahead once more, sweeping him along in a wild and unexpected counterattack.

But the Trade Federation, unlike the Gungans, had other weapons left to call upon. OOM-9, responding to orders from the orbiting battleship command station, unleashed a battalion of destroyer droids from the transports. Down long rampways they wheeled, across the grasslands, over the bodies of shattered battle droids, and through the Gungan energy shield. Transforming into battle mode, they began to advance through the carnage, twin blasters firing in steady cadence. Gungans and kaadu went down in broken heaps, but other Gungans moved quickly to fill the gaps in their lines, slowing the destroyer droids, fighting to hold their ground.

Back and forth the battle raged, the outcome undecided.

Anakin Skywalker had made a promise to himself that he would protect Qui-Gon Jinn and Padmé Naberrie from harm, that he would see to it somehow that nothing bad happened to them. He knew when he made the promise how hard it was going to be to keep. Somewhere in the back of his mind where he would admit such things privately, he knew how foolish it was even to make such a commitment. But he was young and brave at heart, and he had lived his life pretty much on his own terms because to live it any other way would have broken him long ago. It hadn't been easy doing so, especially as a slave. He had survived mostly because he had been able to find small victories in difficult situations and because he had always believed that one day he would find a way to overcome the circumstances of his birth.

His belief in himself had been rewarded. His life had been changed forever by his victory just days earlier in the Boonta Eve Podrace on Tatooine.

It was not so strange then that he should decide he could somehow affect the lives of a Jedi Knight and a Naboo Queen as well, even if he did not know precisely how. He was not afraid to accept such responsibility. He was not daunted by the challenge his decision presented.

But now his resolve was put to the test.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan closed with the Sith Lord in a clash of lightsabers that produced the shriek of diamond-edged saw blades cutting through metal. Wheeling across the center of the hangar, the combatants lunged and parried, attack and counterattack carried out in a fierce, no-holds-barred, no-quarter-given struggle. The Sith Lord

was supple and quick, and he worked his way between the Jedi with confidence and ease, whipping his two-ended lightsaber back and forth between them, more than holding his own against their efforts to bring him down. He was skilled, Anakin saw—more skilled, perhaps, than the men he faced. And he was confident in a way that was disturbing. He would not be overcome easily.

But Padmé and the Naboo faced a more dangerous situation still. At the far end of the hangar, from off the plaza, a cluster of three destroyer droids wheeled through the doorway and began to unfold, assuming battle stance. R2-D2 saw them first and beeped a warning to the boy. Anakin tore his gaze away from the Jedi and the Sith Lord. The destroyer droids had transformed and were already moving forward, laser guns firing into the Naboo. Several soldiers went down, and Sabé was stung by a glancing blow that knocked her backward into the arms of Panaka. Padmé and her companions resisted determinedly, but already they were falling back to find cover.

“We’ve got to help, Artoo,” the boy declared, standing up in the cockpit with the intention of doing something, anything, casting about futilely for a weapon.

But R2-D2 was way ahead of him. The little droid had plugged himself into the starfighter’s computer system, lights blinking across his control panel as he triggered the big engines. Everything roared to life at once, startling Anakin, who fell back in the pilot’s seat in surprise.

Slowly, the ship began to levitate, wheeling out of its mooring space.

“Great work, Artoo!” Anakin shouted excitedly, reaching at once for the steering bars. “Now, let’s see ...”

He wheeled the fighter about so that it was facing toward the combatants. His eyes scanned the control panel desperately, searching for the weapons systems. He knew something of fighters from salvaging wrecks, but nothing of Naboo fighters in particular or of weapons systems in general. Most of what he knew was about guidance systems and engines, and most of that about Pods, speeders, and aging transports.

“Which one, which one?” he muttered, his fingers passing over buttons and levers and switches, undecided.

He lifted his eyes momentarily. One of the Naboo soldiers went down in a crumpled heap, his helmet and blaster flying away in a clatter of metal. Laser charges burned the metal girders and walls about the defenders as the destroyer droids continued their relentless attack on Padmé’s dwindling force.

In desperation, Anakin threw a bank of switches set into a red panel. The fighter began to shake violently, a reaction to a shift in the

stabilizers.

“Uh-oh, wrong ones,” the boy breathed, throwing the switches back into place. His gaze roamed to a bank of four dark buttons recessed deep into finger holes and circled in green. “Maybe these ...”

He pressed down on the buttons. Instantly, the nose lasers fired, their charges ripping into the battle droids. Three went down, charred and smoking scrap.

“Yeah! Droid blasters!” he shouted gleefully, and behind him, R2-D2 beeped his approval.

The remaining destroyer droids wheeled toward him, spreading out across the hangar floor to present a more difficult target. Behind them, Padmé, her handmaidens, Panaka, and the remainder of the Naboo soldiers were racing for the door that led back toward the palace. Anakin watched over the rim of the cockpit as they disappeared safely out the door. “Good luck,” he whispered.

The destroyer droids were advancing on him now, their blasters firing, charges exploding all around him, shaking the fighter’s slim frame. Anakin had a momentary glimpse of the Sith Lord driving the Jedi across the hangar and through an opening into a room beyond, pressing them backward relentlessly, pursuing them with a fury that was terrifying.

Then they disappeared from view as well, and the boy was alone with his attackers.

A laser blast struck the nose of his craft and knocked the ship sideways. The boy tightened his grip on the steering. He fired his own lasers in retaliation, but the destroyer droids had moved too far to either side to be affected, and his charges missed everything but the hangar walls.

He dropped below the rim of the cockpit once more, eyes searching the control panel anew. “Shields up,” he hissed, forcing himself to concentrate as laser blasts streaked all around. “Always on the right side! Shields are always on the right!”

He flipped several likely switches, and the afterburner ignited with a rumble. He pushed another, then one more. The steering handle fought itself free of his grip, and the fighter wheeled about and streaked out through the hangar doors, lifting swiftly away.

The cockpit hood slid smoothly into place, locking about the boy. “Artoo, what’s happening?” he screamed. R2-D2’s nervous beeps and whistles sounded through the intercom speakers. “Yes, I know I pushed something!” the boy answered. “No, I’m not doing anything!” He caught his breath as the beeps continued, and read R2’s words on his cockpit display. “It’s on automatic pilot? Well, try to override it!”

The sleek yellow fighter had left the Naboo atmosphere and was entering deep space, leaving the planet behind, a green and blue jewel

receding into the black.

Ahead, a series of small, silver dots appeared, growing steadily larger. Other ships.

“Artoo, where are we going?” Anakin gasped, still trying to decipher the control panel.

The comm system squawked, and suddenly he was hearing the voices of Ric Olié and the Naboo pilots who had taken off ahead of him.

“This is Bravo Leader.” Ric’s leathery voice broke through the static. “Bravo Two, intercept enemy fighters. Bravo Three, make your run on the transmitter station.”

“Copy, Bravo Leader,” the response came back.

Anakin could see them now, the silver dots taking on recognizable shape, transforming into Naboo starfighters, spread out against the blackness, approaching the larger, blockier form of the Federation battleship.

“Enemy fighters straight ahead,” Ric Olié warned suddenly on the comm.

At the same moment, R2-D2 beeped hurriedly at Anakin. The boy felt his stomach lurch as he read the display. “What do you mean, the autopilot is searching for the other ships? What other ships?” His eyes shifted to the Naboo fighters ahead. “Not those?”

R2-D2 whistled a quick confirmation. Anakin collapsed in his seat. “The autopilot is taking us up there, with them? Into battle?” His mind raced. “Well, get us off autopilot, Artoo!”

The astromech droid beeped and whistled some more. “There is no manual override!” Anakin shouted in despair. “Or at least not any I can find! You’ll have to rewire or something! Artoo, hurry!”

He stared helplessly through the cockpit glass as his fighter streaked directly toward the heart of the Trade Federation swarm, wondering what in the world he was going to do to save himself now.



Qui-Gon Jinn was one of the most able swordsmen in the Jedi order. The Jedi Master he had trained under had considered him one of the best the Master had taught in his more than four hundred years in the order. Qui-Gon had fought in conflicts all across the galaxy in the span of his life and against odds so great that many others would not have stood a chance. He had survived battles that had tested his skill and resolve in every conceivable way.

But on this day, he had met his match. The Sith Lord he battled with Obi-Wan was more than his equal in weapons training, and he had the advantage of being younger and stronger. Qui-Gon was nearing sixty; his youth was behind him and his strength was beginning to diminish. His edge now, to the extent that he had one, came from his long experience and intuitive grasp of how an adversary might employ a lightsaber against him.

Obi-Wan brought youth and stamina to the combat, but he had fought in only a few contests and was not battle hardened. Together, they were able to hold their own against the Sith Lord, but their efforts at attack, at assuming the offensive against this dangerous adversary, were woefully inadequate.

Darth Maul was a warrior in his prime, never to be any better, his powers at their apex. In addition, he was driven by his messianic hatred for and disdain of the Jedi Knights, the enemies of the Sith for millennia. He had worked and trained all his life for this moment, for a chance to meet a Jedi Knight in combat. It was an added bonus that he was able to engage two. He had no fear for himself, no doubt that he would win. He was focused in a way that Qui-Gon recognized at once—a Jedi's focus, mindful of the present, locked in on what was needed in the here and now. Qui-Gon saw it in his mad eyes and in the set of his red and black tattooed features. The Sith Lord was a living example of what the Jedi Master was always telling Obi-Wan about how best to hear the will of the Force.

The three combatants fought their way across the hangar floor, lightsabers flashing, bringing to bear every skill they had acquired over the years. The Jedi Knights tried continually to press the attack,

and indeed, the Sith Lord was moving away from the Naboo and the starfighters and back toward the hangar's far wall. But Qui-Gon recognized that while it might seem as if the Jedi were driving him before them, it was the Sith Lord who was controlling the struggle. Wheeling and spinning, leaping and somersaulting with astonishing ease, their enemy was taking them with him, drawing them on to a place of his own choosing. His agility and dexterity allowed him to keep them both at bay, constantly attacking while at the same time effectively blunting their counterattacks, relentlessly searching for an opening in their defense.

Qui-Gon pressed hard in the beginning, sensing how dangerous this man was, wanting to put an end to the combat quickly. Long hair flying out behind him, he attacked with ferocity and determination. Obi-Wan came with him, following his lead. They had fought together before, and they knew each other's moves. Qui-Gon had trained Obi-Wan, and while the younger Jedi was not yet his equal, he believed that one day Obi-Wan would be better than he had ever been.

So they challenged the Sith Lord quickly, and just as quickly discovered that their best efforts were not good enough to achieve an early resolution. They settled into a pattern then, working as a team against their enemy, waiting for an opening. But the Sith Lord was too smart to give them one, and so the battle had gone on.

They fought their way out of the main hangar through an entry that led into a power station. Catwalks and overhangs crisscrossed a pit in which a tandem of generators that served the starship complex was housed. The room was cavernous and filled with the noise of heavy machinery. Ambient light filtered away in clouds of steam and layers of shadows. The Jedi and the Sith Lord battled onto one of the catwalks suspended above the generators, and the metal frame rang with the thudding of their boots and the clash of their lightsabers.

Alone in the power station, hidden from the rest of Theed and its occupants, they intensified their struggle.

The Sith Lord leapt from the bridge on which they fought to the one above, strange face shining with the heat of the battle and his own peculiar joy. The Jedi followed, one coming up in front of him, one behind, so that they had him pinned between them. Down the length of the catwalk they fought, lightsabers flashing, sparks flying from the metal railing of the walk as they smashed against it.

Then Darth Maul caught Obi-Wan off balance and with a powerful kick knocked the Jedi completely over the railing. Taking advantage of the Sith Lord's assault on Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon forced Darth Maul over the railing as well. Down the Sith Lord tumbled, landing hard on a catwalk several levels below Obi-Wan. The force of the fall or perhaps the unexpectedness of it left him visibly stunned, and Qui-

Gon leapt down after him, sensing a chance to put an end to things. But the Sith Lord struggled back to his feet quickly and raced away, taking the battle in a new direction.

By the time Obi-Wan had recovered, Qui-Gon was in pursuit of Darth Maul, following him down the catwalk toward a small door at the far end of the power station. The Jedi Master went swiftly, legs and arms pumping, lightsaber flashing. He was worn and battered by now, close to exhaustion, but the Sith Lord was on the defensive at last, and he did not want to give him a chance to regroup.

“Qui-Gon!” Obi-Wan called after him, trying to catch up, but the Jedi Master did not slow.

One after the other, the three antagonists passed through the small door into a corridor beyond. They were moving quickly in their frenzied chase and were into the corridor before they realized what it was. Lasers ricocheted off buffer struts, pulsing in long bursts of crisscrossing brilliance that segmented the corridor at five points. The lasers had just begun to kick in when the Sith Lord and the Jedi Knights rushed through the entry. Darth Maul, in the lead, got farthest down the corridor and found himself trapped between walls four and five. Qui-Gon, in close pursuit, was caught only one wall away. Obi-Wan, who was farthest away in the chase, did not get past even the first wall.

Shocked into immobility by the buzz and flash of the lasers, the antagonists froze where they were, casting about for an escape, finding none. Qui-Gon took a quick measure of their location. They were in the service corridor for the melting pit, the disposal unit of the power station’s residue. The service corridor was armed with lasers against unauthorized intrusion. There would be a shutoff switch somewhere at both ends of the passage, but it was too late to look for it now.

The Jedi Knights stared down the laser-riddled corridor at the Sith Lord, who gave them a wicked grin. Don’t worry, they could read in his dark countenance, you won’t have long to wait for me.

Qui-Gon exchanged a meaningful glance with Obi-Wan, then dropped into a guarded crouch to meditate and wait.

Padmé Naberrie, Queen of the Naboo, along with her handmaidens and Captain Panaka and his soldiers, followed the passageways that led out of the main hangar through the city and back to the palace. It was a running battle fought building by building, corridor by corridor, against the battle droids who had been left behind to garrison Theed. They encountered the droids both singly and in entire squads, and there was nothing for it each time but to fight their way clear without becoming entangled in a full-fledged engagement.

As a consequence, they avoided a direct route in favor of one less likely to necessitate contact with the droids. At first they had no choice but to make straight for the palace, fleeing the battle in the main hangar, hoping that speed and surprise would carry them through. When that failed, Panaka began to take a more cautious approach. They used underground tunnels, hidden passageways, and connecting skywalks that avoided the patrols scouring the streets and plazas. When they were discovered, they fought their way clear as quickly as possible and went to ground, all the while continuing steadily on.

In the end, they reached the palace much more quickly than Padmé had dared to hope, entering from a skywalk bridging to a watchtower, then making their way along the palace halls toward the throne room.

They were in the midst of this endeavor when an entire patrol of battle droids rounded a corner of the passage ahead of them and opened fire. Padmé and her followers pressed back into the alcoves and doorways of the hall, firing their own weapons in response, searching for a way out. More battle droids were appearing, and alarms were sounding throughout the palace.

“Captain!” Padmé shouted at Panaka above the din of weapons fire. “We don’t have time for this!”

Panaka’s sweat-streaked face glanced about hurriedly. “Let’s try outside!” he shouted back.

Turning his blaster on a tall window, he blew out the frame and transparisteel. While her handmaidens and the bulk of the Naboo soldiers provided covering fire, the Queen and Panaka, together with half a dozen guards, broke from cover and climbed swiftly out the shattered window.

But now Padmé and her defenders found themselves trapped on a broad ledge six stories above a thundering waterfall and catchment that fed into a series of connecting ponds dotting the palace grounds. Pressed against the stone wall, the Queen cast about furiously for an escape route. Panaka shouted at his men to use their ascension guns, motioning toward a ledge four stories farther up on the building. The Naboo pulled the grapple-line units from their belts, fitted them to the barrels of their blasters, pointed them skyward, and fired. Slender cables uncoiled like striking snakes, the steel-clawed ends embedding themselves in the stone.

Swiftly Padmé and the other Naboo activated the ascension mechanism and were towed up the wall.

From behind, in the hallway where her handmaidens and the rest of the Naboo soldiers still held the battle droids at bay, the firing grew more intense. Padmé ignored the sounds, forcing herself to continue ahead.

When they were on the ledge above, they cast away the cables, and Panaka used his blaster on a window to open a way back into the building. Transparisteel and permacrete shards lay everywhere as they climbed through once more, finding themselves in yet another hallway. They were close to the throne room now; it lay only another story up and several corridors back. Padmé felt a fierce exultation. She would have the Neimoidian viceroy as her prisoner yet!

But the thought was no sooner completed than a pair of destroyer droids wheeled around one end of the hallway, swiftly transforming into battle mode. Mere seconds later, a second pair appeared at the other end, weapons held at the ready.

In a hollow, mechanical monotone, the foremost of the droids ordered them to throw down their weapons.

Padmé hesitated. There was no possibility for an escape unless they went back out the window, and if they did that, they would be trapped on the ledge and rendered helpless. They could try to fight their way free, but while they stood a reasonable chance against battle droids, they were seriously overmatched by their more powerful cousins.

In the wake of this chilling assessment, an inspired thought occurred to her, a solution that might give them the victory they sought in spite of their situation. She straightened, held out her arms in surrender, and tossed aside her blaster.

"Throw down your weapons," she ordered Captain Panaka and his soldiers. "They win this round."

Panaka blanched. "But, Your Majesty, we can't—"

"Captain," Padmé interrupted, her eyes locking with his. "I said to throw down your weapons."

Panaka gave her a look that suggested he clearly thought she had lost her mind. Then he dropped his blaster to the floor and motioned for his men to do the same.

The destroyer droids skittered forward to take them prisoner. But before they reached the Naboo, Padmé was able to complete a quick transmission on her comlink.

"Have faith, Captain," she urged a bewildered Panaka, her voice cool and collected as she slipped the comlink out of sight again.

Things were not going well for the Gungan army. Like the Naboo, the Gungans were no match for the destroyer droids. Slowly, but surely, they were being pushed back, unable to stand against the relentless Trade Federation attack. Here and there along their beleaguered lines, cracks were beginning to appear in their defense.

Jar Jar Binks was at the heart of one of those points.

For a time, his had been one of the strongest positions, his soldiers

rallied by what they mistakenly believed to be his unrivaled bravery, turning a rout into a counterattack. But the counterattack had extended itself too far, and with the appearance of the destroyer droids, it collapsed completely. Now Jar Jar and his comrades were in flight, falling back to where the rest of the army crouched in the shadow of the failing generator shield, desperately trying to find a way to regroup.

Jar Jar, his kaadu long since lost, was running for his life. Desperate to increase the distance between himself and the pursuing destroyer droids, he caught up with a fleeing wagon filled with dozens of the energy balls used by the Gungan catapults. Grabbing hold of the wagon gate, he tried to haul himself into the bed, the wagon jouncing and creaking over the uneven ground. But in his effort to save himself, he unwittingly released the latch on the gate, causing it to flop open. Energy balls released out the back in a wild tumble, bouncing and rolling backward in a swarm. Jar Jar danced out of the way, scrambling to avoid being struck. He was successful in this, but the less nimble destroyer droids on his heels were not. Energy balls smashed into them, exploding on contact, and droid after droid went up in a rain of fire and shattered metal.

"Tis good!" Jar Jar howled in glee, watching the Federation droids wheeling this way and that in an effort to escape the carpet of energy balls rolling into them.

Elsewhere, however, the battle was taking a turn for the worse. Destroyer droids had broken through the Gungan lines fronting the shield generators, and were firing their weapons into the machines over and over. The fambaa on which the generators rode shuddered and dropped to their knees, the generators smoking and sparking. Abruptly, the force field began to waver and fade. OOM-9, watching it all through electrobinoculars, was quick to report back to the Neimoidian command. Federation tanks were ordered forward at once, their guns firing anew.

When General Ceel saw the shield generators lose power, he realized the battle was lost. The Gungans had done all they could for the Queen of the Naboo. Turning to his staff, he signaled for a retreat. The battle horns sounded the call, wailing out across the grasslands, and the entire Gungan army began to fall back.

Jar Jar had gained control of a new mount and was riding madly for the safety of the swamp. Fleeing in the midst of pursuing droids and tanks, he had his kaadu blown out from under him and was thrown sideways onto the back of a nearby tank's gun turret. Hanging on for dear life, he rode the enemy vehicle across the plains as the battle raged on all about him. The droids inside the tank quickly became aware of his presence, and the driver tried to throw him off by

swiveling the turret gun from side to side. But Jar Jar had a death grip on the barrel, hugging it tightly to him, and refused to be dislodged.

“Hep me! Hep me!” he screamed out.

Captain Tarpals astride a kaadu worked his way alongside the tank, yelling at Jar Jar to jump. Laser fire ricocheted off the tank, barely missing Jar Jar as he struggled to overcome his fear and break free of his precarious perch. Hatches were beginning to open and droid heads to appear. His eyes widened as he saw weapons being lifted and brought to bear.

He jumped then, flinging himself clear of the tank, landing awkwardly behind the Gungan who had stayed to save him. The kaadu, burdened by two riders, lurched wildly, then righted itself and swerved quickly away.

Explosions mushroomed all around them, sending gouts of dirt skyward, and Jar Jar Binks, arms wrapped around the other rider, eyes closed in terror against the chaos taking place all around him, was pretty sure that this was the end.

Anakin Skywalker, meanwhile, was caught up in the midst of a dogfight between Naboo and Federation starfighters. Still struggling to get off autopilot, he had avoided engagement with the enemy mostly because his craft was flying in an erratic, evasive manner that took it out of combat range every time it got too close for comfort. Fighters were exploding all around him, some so close he could see the pieces as they flew past his canopy.

“Whoo, boy, this is tense!” he breathed as he tried switch after switch on the control panel, the fighter dipping and yawing in response to his unwelcome interference with its operation.

But he was learning the control panel, too, his trial-and-error exploration yielding knowledge of what various switches, buttons, and levers did. The downside to all this was that the firing triggers to the laser guns had locked, and try as he might, he could not find a way to break them free.

He glanced up from his search at a loud beep from R2-D2 to find a pair of Federation fighters approaching him head-on.

“Artoo, Artoo, get us off—!”

The astromech droid overrode the rest of what he was going to say with a series of frantic whistles.

“I’ve got control?” Anakin exclaimed in shock.

He seized the steering, flipped on the power feeds, and jammed the thruster bars left. To his surprise and everlasting gratitude, the fighter banked sharply in response, and they shot past the fighters and rode into a new swarm of combatants.

“Yes! I’ve got control!” Anakin was ecstatic. “You did it, Artoo!”

The astromech droid beeped at him through the intercom, a short, abrupt exchange.

Anakin's eyebrows shot up as he read the display. "Go back to Naboo? Forget it! Qui-Gon told me to stay in this cockpit, and that's what I'm gonna do! Now, hang on!"

His enthusiasm overrode his good sense, and he whipped his fighter toward the center of the battle. All of his flying instincts kicked in, and he was back in the Podraces on Tatooine, a part of his ship, locked in on the intoxicating challenge of winning. Forgotten was his promise to look after Qui-Gon and Padmé; they were too far away for him to think about them now. All that mattered was that he had found his way into space, taken command of a starfighter, and been given a chance to live his dream.

An enemy fighter drifted into his sights ahead. "Sit tight, Artoo," he warned. "I'm gonna blast this guy."

He brought his ship into firing position behind the Trade Federation craft, remembering belatedly that the triggers to his laser guns were locked. Frantically, he searched for the release.

"Which one, Artoo?" he shouted into his helmet. "How do I fire this thing?"

R2-D2 beeped wildly.

"Which one? This one?"

He punched the button the astromech droid had indicated, but instead of releasing the firing mechanism, it accelerated the fighter right past the enemy ship.

"Whoa!" Anakin gasped in dismay.

Now the Trade Federation fighter was on his tail, maneuvering into firing position against him. Anakin yanked hard on the steering, shooting past the massive Federation battleship, screaming out into the void in a series of evasive actions.

"That wasn't the release!" the boy screamed into his intercom. "That was the overdrive!"

R2-D2 whistled a sheepish reply. The enemy fighter was behind them again and closing. Anakin banked his ship hard to the right and brought it back toward the blockade and the swarming fighters. Wrenching the stabilizers in opposite directions, he began to spin his fighter like a top. R2-D2 shrieked in despair.

"I know we're in trouble!" Anakin shrieked back. "Just hang on! The way out of this mess is the way we got into it!"

He streaked toward the control station, taking the enemy fighter with him. Laser blasts ripped past him, barely missing. He waited a second longer, until he was so close to the battleship that the emblem of the Trade Federation painted on the bridge work loomed like a wall, then engaged the reverse thrusters and banked right again.

His fighter nearly stalled, dropping away like a stone for a heart-wrenching moment before stabilizing. The enemy fighter, on the other hand, had no time to respond to the maneuver and rocketed past him into the side of the battleship, exploding in a shower of fire and metal parts.

Reengaging the forward thrusters, Anakin wheeled the ship about, searching for new enemies. Through his canopy, he could see a handful of Naboo starfighters engaged in attacking the Trade Federation flagship.

Ric Olié's voice came over the intercom. "Bravo Three! Go for the central bridge!"

"Copy, Bravo Leader," came the response.

A squad of four fighters plummeted toward the battleship, lasers firing, but the big ship's deflector shields turned the attack aside effortlessly. Two of the fighters were hit by cannon fire and exploded into ash. The remaining two broke off the attack.

"Their shields are too strong!" one of the surviving pilots shouted angrily. "We'll never get through!"

Anakin, in the meantime, was under attack once more. Another Federation fighter had found him and was giving chase. The boy jammed the thruster bars forward and sped down the hull of the flagship, twisting and turning through its channels and around its tangle of protrusions, laser fire ricocheting past in a constant stream.

"I know this isn't Podracing!" Anakin snapped at R2-D2, as the astromech droid beeped reprovingly at him.

But in his heart, it felt as if it were. A fierce glee rushed through him as he whipped the Naboo fighter along the length of the battleship. The speed and the quickness of the battle fed into him in a rush of adrenaline. He would not have been anywhere else for the world!

But this time his luck ran out. As he neared the ship's tail, a laser blast struck his fighter a solid blow, knocking it into a stomach-lurching spin. R2-D2 screamed anew, and Anakin fought desperately to regain control.

"Great gobs of bantha poodoo!" the boy hissed, fighting to stabilize his stricken craft.

He was hurtling directly toward the hull, and he pulled back on the thruster bars, cutting power and drifting into a long slide. He regained control too late to turn back, and pointed the ship toward a giant opening at the battleship's center. Cannon fire whipped all about him as the droids controlling the flagship's guns tried to bring him down, but he was past them in a microsecond, rocketing into the battleship's cavernous main hangar. Reverse thrusters on full power, dodging transports, tanks, fighters, and stacks of supplies, he struggled to keep

his fighter airborne as he looked for a place to land.

R2-D2 was beeping wildly. "I'm trying to stop!" Anakin shouted in reply. "Whoa! Whoa! I'm trying!"

The Naboo fighter struck the decking and bounced, reverse thrusters powering up in an effort to brake the craft. A bulkhead loomed ahead, blocking the way. Anakin brought the fighter down on the decking with a bone-jarring thud and held it there, skidding down the rampway in a screech of metal. The fighter slowed and did a half turn and came to an unsteady halt. The power drive stalled and then failed completely.

R2-D2 whistled in relief.

"All right, all right!" Anakin gasped, nodding to himself. "We're down. Let's get the engines started again and get out of here!"

He ducked down to adjust the feeders to the fuel lines, checking the control panel indicators worriedly. "Lights are all red, Artoo. Everything's overheated."

He was working on the coolants when R2-D2 beeped suddenly in warning. The boy popped his head over the edge of the cockpit and looked out into the hangar. "Oh, oh," he muttered softly.

Dozens of battle droids were approaching across the hangar floor, weapons raised menacingly. Their only escape route was blocked.



Obi-Wan Kenobi prowled the front end of the service corridor to the melting pit like a caged animal. He was furious at himself for getting trapped so far from Qui-Gon and furious with Qui-Gon for letting this happen by rushing ahead instead of waiting for him. But he was worried, too. He could admit it to himself, privately, if only just. They should have won this battle long ago. Against any other opponent, they would have. But the Sith Lord was battle trained and seasoned well beyond anyone they had ever encountered before. He had matched them blow for blow, and they weren't any closer to winning this fight now than they had been in the beginning.

Obi-Wan stared down the length of the corridor, measuring the distance he would have to travel to reach Qui-Gon and his antagonist when the lasers paused. He had caught a glimpse of them deactivating while rushing to catch up with Qui-Gon, then of reactivating again in a matter of seconds. He would have to be quick. Very quick. He did not want the Master facing this tattooed madman alone.

Down the way, pinned between two walls of laser beams, Qui-Gon Jinn knelt in meditation, facing toward the Sith Lord and the melting pit, his head lowered over his lightsaber. He was gathering himself for a final assault, bringing himself in tune with the Force. Obi-Wan did not like the weariness he saw in the slump of the older man's shoulders, in the bow of his back. He was the best swordsman Obi-Wan had ever seen, but he was growing old.

Beyond, the Sith Lord worked at binding up his wounds, a series of burns and slashes marked by charred tears in his dark clothing. He was backed to the edge of the chamber beyond, keeping a close watch on Qui-Gon, his red and black face intense, his yellow eyes glinting in the half light. His lightsaber rested on the floor before him. He saw Obi-Wan staring and smiled in open derision.

At that instant, the laser beams warding the service corridor went off.

Obi-Wan sprinted ahead, launching himself down the narrow passageway, lightsaber raised. Qui-Gon was on his feet as well, his own weapon flashing. He catapulted through the opening that led into

the melting pit and closed with the Sith Lord, forcing him back, out of the passageway completely. Obi-Wan put on a new burst of speed, howling out at the antagonists ahead, as if by the sound of his voice he could bring them back to him.

Then he heard the buzz of the capacitors kicking in once more, cycling to reactivate the lasers. He threw himself ahead, still too far from the corridor's end. He cleared all the gates but the last, and the lasers crisscrossed before him in a deadly wall, bringing him to an abrupt stop just short of where he needed to be.

Lightsaber clutched in both hands, he stood watching helplessly as Qui-Gon Jinn and Darth Maul battled on the narrow ledge that encircled the melting pit. A stream of electrons was all that separated him from the combatants, but it might as well have been a wall of permacrete three meters thick. Desperately he cast about for a triggering device that might shut the system down, but he had no better luck here than he'd had at the other end. He could only watch and wait and pray that Qui-Gon could hold on.

It appeared that the Jedi Master would. He had found a fresh reserve of strength during his meditation, and now he was attacking with a ferocity that seemed to have the Sith Lord stymied. With quick, hard strokes of his lightsaber, he bored into his adversary, deliberately engaging in close-quarters combat, refusing to let the other bring his double-bladed weapon to bear. He drove Darth Maul backward about the rim of the overhang, keeping the Sith Lord constantly on the defensive, pressing in on him steadily. Qui-Gon Jinn might no longer be young, but he was still powerful. Darth Maul's ragged face took on a frenzied look, and the glitter of his strange eyes brightened with uncertainty.

Good, Master, Obi-Wan thought, urging him on voicelessly, anticipating Qui-Gon's sword strokes as if they were his own.

Then Darth Maul back-flipped across the melting pit, giving himself some space in which to recover, gaining just enough time to assume a new battle stance. Qui-Gon was on him in an instant, covering the distance separating them in a rush, hammering into the Sith Lord anew. But he was beginning to weary now from carrying the battle alone. His strokes were not so vigorous as before, his face bathed with sweat and taut with fatigue.

Slowly, Darth Maul began to edge his way back into the fight, becoming the aggressor once more.

Hurry! Obi-Wan hissed soundlessly, willing the lasers to pause and the gates to come down.

Stroke for stroke, Qui-Gon and Darth Maul battled about the rim of the melting pit, locked in a combat that seemed endless and forever and could be won by neither.

Then the Sith Lord parried a downstroke, whirled swiftly to the right, and with his back to the Jedi Master, made a blind, reverse lunge. Too late, Qui-Gon recognized the danger. The blade of the Sith Lord's lightsaber caught him directly in the midsection, its brilliant length burning through clothing and flesh and bone.

Obi-Wan thought he heard the Jedi Master scream, then realized it was himself, calling his friend's name in despair. Qui-Gon made no sound as the blade entered him, stiffening with the impact, then taking a small step back as it was withdrawn. He stood motionless for an instant, fighting against the shock of the killing blow. Then his eyes clouded, his arms lowered, and a great weariness settled over his proud features. He dropped to his knees, and his lightsaber clattered to the stone floor.

He was slumped forward and motionless when the lasers abruptly went off again, and Obi-Wan Kenobi, seething with rage, rushed to his rescue.

Nute Gunray stood with Rune Haako and four members of the Trade Federation Occupation Council as Captain Panaka, one of the Queen's handmaidens, and the six Naboo soldiers who had fought to protect them were marched into the Theed palace throne room by a squad of ten battle droids. The viceroy recognized Panaka at once, but he was unclear as to the identity of the handmaiden who accompanied him. He was looking for the Queen, and while this handmaiden bore a certain resemblance to her ...

He caught himself in surprise. It *was* the Queen, without her makeup and ornate robes, stripped of her symbols of office. She looked even younger than she had in ceremonial garb, but her eyes and that cool gaze were unmistakable.

He glanced at Rune Haako and saw the same confusion mirrored in his associate's face.

"Your Highness," he greeted as she was led up to him.

"Viceroy," she replied, confirming his conclusion as to her identity.

That settled, he swiftly assumed the pose of a captor confronting his captive. "Your little insurrection is at an end, Your Highness. The rabble army you sent against us south of the city has been crushed. The Jedi are being dealt with elsewhere. And you are my captive."

"Am I?" she asked quietly.

The way she spoke the words was unnerving. There was something challenging in the way she said them, as if she were daring him to disagree. Even Panaka turned to look at her.

"Yes, you are." He pressed ahead, wondering suddenly if he had missed something. His face lifted. "It is time for you to put an end to the pointless debate you instigated in the Republic Senate. Sign the

treaty now.”

There was a commotion outside the doorway leading into the throne room, the sound of blasters and the shattering of metal, and all at once Queen Amidala was standing in the anteway beyond, a clutch of battle droids collapsed on the floor and a handful of Naboo soldiers warding their Queen against the appearance of more.

“I will not be signing any treaty, Viceroy!” she called out to him, already beginning to move away. “You’ve lost!”

For a moment Nute Gunray was so stunned he could not make himself move. A second Queen? But this was the real one, dressed in her robes of office, wearing her white face paint, speaking to him in that imperious voice he had come to recognize so well.

He wheeled toward the battle droids holding Panaka and the false Queen at bay. “You six! After her!” He gestured in the direction of the disappearing Amidala. “Bring her to me! The real one, this time—not some decoy!”

The droids he had indicated rushed from the room in pursuit of the Queen and her guards, leaving the Neimoidians and the four remaining droids with their Naboo captives.

Gunray wheeled on the handmaiden. “Your Queen will not get away with this!” he snapped, enraged at having been deceived.

The handmaiden seemed to lose all her bravado, turning away from him with her head lowered in defeat, moving slowly toward the Queen’s throne and slumping dejectedly into it. Nute Gunray dismissed her almost at once, turning his attention to the other Naboo, anxious to have them taken away to the camps.

But in the next instant the handmaiden was back on her feet, any sign of dejection or weariness banished, a blaster in either hand, pulled from a hidden compartment in the arm of the throne. Tossing one of the blasters to Captain Panaka, she began firing the second into the depleted squad of battle droids. The droids were caught completely by surprise, their attention fixed on the Naboo guards, and the handmaiden and Panaka dispatched them in a flurry of shots that left the throne room ringing with the sound of weapons fire.

Shouting instructions to the Naboo, the handmaiden—if that’s who she really was, because by now Nute Gunray was beginning to think otherwise—moved to the throne room doors, triggering the locks. The doors swung shut, the bolts engaged, and the girl smashed the locking mechanism with the butt of her weapon.

She turned then to the Neimoidians, who were huddled together in confusion at the center of the room, eyes darting this way and that in a futile search for help. All the battle droids lay shattered on the floor, and the Naboo had seized their blasters.

The handmaiden walked up to Gunray. “Let’s start again, Viceroy,”

she said coolly.

“Your Highness,” he replied, tight-lipped, realizing the truth too late.

She nodded. “This is the end of your occupation.”

He stood his ground. “Don’t be absurd. There are too few of you. It won’t be long before hundreds of destroyer droids break in here to rescue us.”

Even before he finished, there was the sound of heavy wheels in the anteway, then of metal bodies unfolding. The viceroy permitted himself a satisfied smile. “You see, Your Highness? Rescue is already at hand.”

The Queen gave him a hard look. “Before they make it through that door, we will have negotiated a new treaty, Viceroy. And you will have signed it.”

Free at last of the laser wall, Obi-Wan Kenobi charged out of the service tunnel and into the chamber that housed the melting pit. Abandoning any pretense of observing even the slightest caution, he barreled into Darth Maul with such fury that he almost knocked both of them off the ledge and into the abyss. He struck at the Sith Lord with his lightsaber as if his own safety meant nothing, lost in a red haze of rage and frustration, consumed by his grief for Qui-Gon and his failure to prevent his friend’s fall.

The Sith Lord was borne backward by the Jedi Knight’s initial rush, caught off guard by the other’s wild assault, and pressed all the way back to the far wall of the melting pit. There he struggled to keep the young Jedi at bay, trying to open enough space between them to defend himself. Lightsabers scraped and grated against each other, and the chamber echoed with their fury. Lunging and twisting, Darth Maul regained the offensive and counterattacked, using both ends of his lightsaber in an effort to cut Obi-Wan’s legs out from under him. But Obi-Wan, while not so experienced as Qui-Gon, was quicker. Anticipating each blow, he was able to elude his antagonist’s efforts to bring him down.

The struggle took them around the edge of the melting pit and into the nooks and alcoves beyond, into shadowed recesses and around smoky pillars and pipe housings. Twice, Obi-Wan went down, losing his footing on the smooth flooring of the melting pit’s rim. Once, Darth Maul hammered at him with such determination that he scorched the young Jedi’s tunic, shoulder to waist, and it was only by countering with an upthrust counterstrike to the other’s midsection and by rolling quickly away and back to his feet that Obi-Wan was able to escape.

They fought their way back toward the laser-riddled service

passage, past Qui-Gon's still form, and into a tangle of vent tubes and circuit housings. Steam burst from ruptured pipes, and the air was filled with the acrid smell of scorched wiring. Darth Maul began to use his command of the Force to fling heavy objects at Obi-Wan, trying to throw him off balance, to disable him, to disrupt the flow of his attack. Obi-Wan responded in kind, and the air was filled with deadly missiles. Lightsabers flicked right and left to ward off the objects, and the clash of errant metal careening off stone walls formed an eerie shriek in the gloom.

The battle wore on, and for a time it was fought evenly. But Darth Maul was the stronger of the two and was driven by a frenzy that surpassed even the frantic determination that fueled Obi-Wan. Eventually, the Sith Lord began to wear the young Jedi down. Bit by bit, he pressed him back, carrying the attack to him, looking to catch him off guard. Obi-Wan could sense his body weakening, and his fear of what it would mean if he, too, were to fall, began to grow.

Never! he swore furiously.

Qui-Gon's words came back to him. *Don't center on your fears. Concentrate on the here and now.* He struggled to do so, to contain the emotions warring within and bearing him down. *Be mindful of the living Force, my young Padawan. Be strong.*

Sensing his opportunity slipping away from him and his strength waning, Obi-Wan mounted a final assault. He rushed the Sith Lord with a series of side blows designed to bring the two-bladed lightsaber horizontal. Then he feinted an attack to his enemy's left and brought his own lightsaber over and down with such force that he severed the other's weapon.

Crying out in fury, he cut triumphantly at the Sith Lord's horned head, a killing blow.

And missed completely.

Darth Maul, anticipating the maneuver, had stepped smoothly away. Discarding the lesser half of his severed weapon, he counterattacked swiftly, striking at Obi-Wan with enough force that he knocked the young Jedi sideways and off balance. Quickly he struck him again, harder still, and this time Obi-Wan lost his footing completely and tumbled over the edge of the pit, his lightsaber flying from his hand. For an instant, he was falling, tumbling away into the dark. He reached out in desperation and caught hold of a metal rung just below the lip of the pit.

There he hung, helpless, staring up at a triumphant Darth Maul.

When Anakin Skywalker got a look at the number of battle droids surrounding his starfighter, he ducked back out of sight again at once. If it had been at all possible, he would have vanished into the ship's

fuselage and willed them both right through the hangar floor to a safer haven.

"This is not good," he told himself softly.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he tried to decide what to do. He was just a boy, but he had experience with being in tight places and a cool head when it came to dealing with trouble. Find a way out of this! he admonished himself.

A quick glance at the main and sublevel control panels revealed that all the indicator lights were still red. No help there.

"Artoo," he whispered. "The systems are still overheated. Can you do something?"

Footsteps approached, and a metallic droid voice demanded, "Where is your pilot?"

R2-D2 beeped bravely in reply.

"You are the pilot?"

The astromech droid whistled affirmatively.

There was a confused pause. "Show me your identification," the battle droid commanded, reverting to rote.

Anakin could hear the sound of switches clicking and circuits kicking in. R2-D2 was still trying to save them. Good old Artoo. The astromech droid beeped softly at Anakin, and the boy saw the systems lights change abruptly from red to green.

"Yes, Artoo!" he hissed in relief. "We're up and running!"

He threw the ignition switches, and the fighter's engines roared to life. Swiftly, he leapt from hiding and took his place in the pilot's seat, hands reaching for the steering.

The droid commander saw him now and brought up his weapon. "Leave the cockpit immediately or we will disable your craft! "

"Not if I can help it!" the boy threw back, reaching for the deflectors. "Shields up!"

Hauling back on the steering, he released the antigrav lifts. The starfighter rose from the hangar floor, throwing off the droid commander, sending him sprawling in a crumpled heap. The droids under his command began firing their blasters, the laser beams ricocheting off the fighter's deflectors, angling away in a tangle of bright streamers.

R2-D2 beeped wildly. "The gun locks are off!" Anakin exclaimed with a joyful shout. "Now we'll show them!"

He punched in the firing buttons and held them down, rotating the fighter clockwise above the hangar floor. Laser beams rocketed in a pinwheel pattern, scything into the unprotected battle droids, disabling them before they could even think to flee. Anakin was howling with glee, caught up in the exhilaration of finding himself back in control. Lasers firing, he swept the hangar floor clean of

droids, watching those still distant rush for cover, watching ships and supplies fly apart as the deadly beams cut through them.

Then something moved at the end of a long corridor, no more than a shadow, and deep inside, his instincts kicked into high gear, shrieking at him in a frenzy of need. He didn't know if what he was seeing was a weapon or a machine or something else, and it didn't matter. He was back in the Podraces, locked in battle with Sebulba, and he could see what no one else could, what was hidden from all others. He reacted without thinking, responding to a voice that spoke to him alone, that whispered always of the future while warding him in the present.

Acting of its own accord, faster than thought, his hand left the laser firing buttons and threw a double-hinged switch to the right. Instantly, a pair of torpedoes sped down the corridor in the direction of the shadow. The torpedoes whipped past the battle droids, supply stacks, transports, and everything else, and disappeared through a broad vent.

The boy groaned. "Darn! Missed everything!"

Giving the matter no further thought, he swung the fighter about swiftly and threw the thruster bars forward. The power drive kicked in with a ferocious roar, and the starfighter shot across the hangar deck, scattered droids in every direction, and catapulted back out into space, cannon fire from the battleship chasing after it in a stream of deadly white fire.

Darth Maul walked slowly to the edge of the melting pit, tattooed face bathed in sweat, eyes wild and bright with joy. The battle was finished. The last Jedi was about to be dispatched. He smiled and shifted the remnant of his shattered lightsaber from one hand to the other, savoring the moment.

Eyes fixed on the Sith Lord, Obi-Wan Kenobi went deep inside himself, connecting with the Force he had worked so hard to understand. Calming himself, stilling the trembling of his heart, and banishing his anger and fear, he called upon the last of his reserves. With clarity of purpose and strength of heart, he launched himself away from the side of the pit and catapulted back toward its lip. Imbued with the power of the Force, he cleared the rim easily, somersaulting behind the Sith Lord in a single smooth, powerful motion. Even as he landed, he was drawing Qui-Gon Jinn's fallen lightsaber to his outstretched hand.

Darth Maul whirled to confront him, shock and rage twisting his red and black face. But before he could act to save himself, Qui-Gon's lightsaber slashed through his chest, burning him with killing fire. The stricken Sith Lord howled in pain and disbelief.

Then Obi-Wan turned, thumbed his saber off, and watched his dying enemy tumble away into the pit.

“Whoa, this is way better than Podracing!” Anakin Skywalker shouted at R2-D2, grinning broadly as he zigzagged his Naboo fighter back and forth to throw the gunners off.

The astromech droid was beeping and chirping as if he had fried all his circuits, but the boy refused to listen, rolling and banking the starfighter wildly, angling back toward Naboo and away from the control station.

Then a shocked voice came over the intercom from another of the fighters. “Bravo Leader, what’s happening to the control ship?”

In the next instant, a flash of pulsing light swept past him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the battleship he had escaped wracked by a series of explosions. Huge chunks tore away from the core, hurtling into space.

“It’s blowing up from the inside!” the voice on the intercom exclaimed.

“Wasn’t us, Bravo Two,” Ric Olié replied quickly. “We never hit it.”

The battleship continued to break apart, the explosions tearing through it, shattering it, engulfing it, and finally consuming it altogether in a brilliant ball of light.

Debris flew past the canopy of Anakin’s fighter, and the light of the explosions faded to black.

“Look!” Bravo Two broke the sudden silence anew. “That’s one of ours! Outta the main hold! Must’ve been him!”

Anakin cringed. He had hoped he might get back to the planet unseen, avoid having to explain to Qui-Gon what he was doing up here. There was no chance of that now.

R2-D2 beeped reprovingly at him. “I know, I know,” he muttered wearily, and wondered just how much trouble he had gotten himself into this time.

Blaster shots hammered into the door of the throne room in the palace at Theed. Captain Panaka and the Naboo soldiers spread out to either side in a defensive stance, preparing a crossfire for the droids. Nute Gunray wanted to move out of range, but the Queen was still facing him, her blaster leveled at his midsection, and he did not care to risk provoking her into a hasty action. So he stood there with the others of the Trade Council, frozen in place.

Then abruptly, everything went still. All sound of weapons fire and droid movement beyond the battered throne room doors ceased.

Captain Panaka looked at the Queen, his dark face uncertain. “What’s going on?” he asked worriedly.

Amidala, her weapon pointed at Nute Gunray, shook her head. “Try

communications. Activate the viewscreens.”

Her head of security moved quickly to do so. All eyes were on him as he slowly brought the outer screens into focus.

On the Naboo grasslands, the Gungan army had been overrun. Some of the Gungans had escaped back into the swamp on their kaadu, and some had fled into the hills west. All were being chased by battle droids on STAPs and by Trade Federation tanks. There was not much hope that they would remain free for long.

Most of the Gungans had already been taken prisoner, Jar Jar Binks among them. He stood now in a group of Gungan officers that included General Ceel. All around them, their fellow Gungans were being herded away by Trade Federation droids.

“Dis very bombad,” Jar Jar ventured disconsolately.

General Ceel nodded, equally forlorn. “Me hope dis worken for da Queen.”

Jar Jar sighed. And Annie, Quiggon, Obi-One, Artoo, and all the rest. He wondered what had happened to them. Had they been captured, too? He thought suddenly of Boss Nass. Da Boss wasn’t gonna like this one bit. Jar Jar hoped he wasn’t going to get the blame, but he couldn’t quite rule out the possibility.

Suddenly, all the droids started shaking violently. Some began to run around in circles, others to dip and sway as if their gears had snapped and their circuits shorted out. Tanks skidded to a halt and STAPs crashed. All activity came to a complete stop.

Jar Jar and General Ceel exchanged a confused look. The droid army had locked up. For as far as the eye could see, it stood frozen in place.

Gungan prisoners stared at the motionless droids. Finally, at General Ceel’s urging, Jar Jar edged out of the containment circle and touched one of his metal captors. The droid tipped over and lay lifeless on the grass.

“Dis loony,” Jar Jar whispered, and wondered what in the world was going on.

Obi-Wan did not pause to consider what it had cost him to win his victory over Darth Maul, but rushed immediately to Qui-Gon. Kneeling at the Jedi Master’s side, he lifted his head and shoulders and cradled him gently in his arms.

“Master!” he breathed in a whisper.

Qui-Gon’s eyes opened. “Too late, my young Padawan.”

“No!” Obi-Wan shook his head violently in denial.

“Now you must be ready, whether the Council thinks you so or not. You must be the teacher.” The strong face twisted in pain, but the dark eyes were steady. “Obi-Wan. Promise me you will train the boy.”

Obi-Wan nodded instantly, agreeing without thinking, willing to say or do anything that would ease the other's pain, desperate to save him. "Yes, Master."

Qui-Gon's breathing quickened. "He is the chosen one, Obi-Wan. He will bring balance to the Force. Train him well."

His eyes locked on Obi-Wan's and lost focus. His breathing stopped. The strength and the life went out of him.

"Master," Obi-Wan Kenobi repeated softly, still holding him, bringing him closer now, hugging the lifeless body against his chest, and crying softly. "Master."

Three days later, Obi-Wan Kenobi stood in a small room of the Theed temple in which the deaths of heroes were mourned and their lives celebrated. Qui-Gon Jinn's body lay in state on a bier in the plaza just outside, awaiting cremation. Already the citizenry and officials of the Naboo and the Gungan peoples were gathering to honor the Jedi Master.

Much had changed in the lives of those who had fought in the struggle for Naboo sovereignty. With the collapse of the droid army, the Trade Federation's control over Naboo had been broken. All of the ground transports, tanks, STAPs, and weapons and supplies were in the hands of the Republic. Viceroy Nute Gunray, his lieutenant, Rune Haako, and the remainder of the Neimoidian occupation council had been shipped as prisoners to Coruscant to await trial. Senator Palpatine had been elected as supreme chancellor of the Republic, and he had promised swift action in the dispensing of justice to the captives.

Queen Amidala had outfoxed the Neimoidians one final time by pretending to surrender so she could gain safe access to the viceroy before he had time to flee. She had communicated to Sabé to break away from the struggle taking place several floors below and to use the service passages to reach the Queen's chambers and then make her appearance before the viceroy. It was a calculated risk, and Sabé might not have been able to get there in time. Had she not, Amidala would have triggered the secret compartment release and fought for her freedom in any case. She was young, but she was not without courage or daring. She had shown intelligence and insight from the beginning of the time the Jedi had come to assist her. Obi-Wan thought she would make a very good Queen.

But it was a nine-year-old boy who had saved them all. Even without knowing exactly what he was doing, Anakin Skywalker had flown a starfighter into the teeth of the Federation defense, penetrated their shields, landed in the belly of the Neimoidian flagship, torpedoed the ship's reactor, and set off a chain reaction of explosions that destroyed the control station. It was the destruction of the central

transmitter that had caused the droid army to freeze in place, their communications effectively short-circuited. Anakin claimed not to have attacked with any sort of plan in mind or fired his starfighter's torpedoes with any expectation of hitting the reactor. But after hearing the boy's tale and questioning him thoroughly, Obi-Wan believed Anakin was guided by something more than the thinking of ordinary men. That extraordinarily high midi-chlorian count gave the boy a connection to the Force that even Jedi Masters on the order of Yoda might never achieve. Qui-Gon, he now believed, had been right. Anakin Skywalker was the chosen one.

He paced the room, dressed in fresh clothing for the funeral, soft, loose-fitting, sand-colored Jedi Knight garb, Qui-Gon's lightsaber, now his own, hanging from his belt. The Jedi Council had come to Naboo for the funeral and to speak again with Anakin. They were doing so now, close by, making a final assessment based on what had transpired since their last session with the boy. Obi-Wan thought the outcome of their deliberations must be a foregone conclusion. He could not imagine now that it wouldn't be.

He stopped his pacing and stared momentarily at nothing, thinking of Qui-Gon Jinn, his Master, his teacher, his friend. He had failed Qui-Gon in life. But he would carry on his work now, honoring him in death by fulfilling his promise to train the boy, no matter what.

Listen to me, he thought, smiling ruefully. I sound like him.

The door opened, and Yoda appeared. He entered the room in a slow shuffle, leaning on his walking stick, his wizened face sleepy-eyed and contemplative.

"Master Yoda," Obi-Wan greeted, hurrying forward to meet him, bowing deferentially.

The Jedi Master nodded. "Confer on you the level of Jedi Knight, the Council does. Decided about the boy, the Council is, Obi-Wan," he advised solemnly.

"He is to be trained?"

The big ears cocked forward, and the lids to those sleepy eyes widened. "So impatient, you are. So sure of what has been decided?"

Obi-Wan bit his tongue and kept his silence, waiting dutifully on the other. Yoda studied him carefully. "A great warrior, was Qui-Gon Jinn," he gargled softly, his strange voice sad. "But so much more he could have been, if not so fast he had run. More slowly, you must proceed, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan stood his ground. "He understood what the rest of us did not about the boy."

But Yoda shook his head. "Be not so quick to judge. Not everything, is understanding. Not all at once, is it revealed. Years, it takes, to become a Jedi Knight. Years more, to become one with the Force."

He moved over to a place where the fading light shone in through a window, soft and golden. Sunset approached, the appointed time for their farewell to Qui-Gon.

Yoda's gaze was distant when he spoke. "Decided, the Council is," he repeated. "Trained, the boy shall be."

Obi-Wan felt a surge of relief and joy flood through him, and a grateful smile escaped him.

Yoda saw the smile. "Pleased, you are? So certain this is right?" The wrinkled face tightened. "Clouded, this boy's future remains, Obi-Wan. A mistake to train him, it is."

"But the Council—"

"Yes, decided." The sleepy eyes lifted. "Disagree with that decision, I must."

There was a long silence as the two faced each other, listening to the sounds of the funeral preparations taking place without. Obi-Wan did not know what to say. Clearly the Council had decided against the advice of Yoda. That in itself was unusual. That the Jedi Master chose to make a point of it here emphasized the extent of his concerns about Anakin Skywalker.

Obi-Wan spoke carefully. "I will take this boy as my Padawan, Master. I will train him in the best way I can. But I will bear in mind what you have told me here. I will go carefully. I will heed your warnings. I will keep close watch over his progress."

Yoda studied him a moment, then nodded. "Your promise, then, remember well, young Jedi," he said softly. "Sufficient, it is, if you do."

Obi-Wan bowed in acknowledgment. "I will remember."

Together, they went out into a blaze of light.

The funeral pyre was lit, the fire building steadily around the body of Qui-Gon Jinn, the flames slowly beginning to envelop and consume him. Those who had been chosen to honor him encircled the pyre. Queen Amidala stood with her handmaidens, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, Governor Sio Bibble, Captain Panaka, and an honor guard of one hundred Naboo soldiers. Boss Nass, Jar Jar Binks, and twenty Gungan warriors stood across from them. Linking them together were the members of the Jedi Council, including Yoda and Mace Windu. Another clutch of Jedi Knights, those who had known Qui-Gon longest and best, completed the circle.

Anakin Skywalker stood with Obi-Wan, his young face intense as he fought to hold back his tears.

A long, sustained drum roll traced the passage of the flames as they reduced Qui-Gon to spirit and ash. When the fire had taken him away, a flight of snowy doves was released into a crimson sunset. The birds

rose in a flutter of wings and a splash of pale brilliance, winging swiftly away.

Obi-Wan found himself remembering. For his entire life, he had studied under the Jedi, and Qui-Gon Jinn, in particular. Now Qui-Gon was gone, and Obi-Wan had passed out of an old life and into a new. Now he was a Jedi Knight, not a Padawan. Everything that had gone before was behind a door that had closed on him forever. It was hard to accept, and at the same time, it gave him an odd sense of release.

He looked down at Anakin. The boy was staring at the ashes of the funeral bier, crying softly.

He put his hand on one slim shoulder. "He is one with the Force, Anakin. You must let him go."

The boy shook his head. "I miss him."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I miss him, too. And I will remember him always. But he is gone."

Anakin wiped the tears from his face. "What will happen to me now?"

The hand tightened on the boy's shoulder. "I will train you, just as Qui-Gon would have done," Obi-Wan Kenobi said softly. "I am your new Master, Anakin. You will study with me, and you will become a Jedi Knight, I promise you."

The boy straightened, a barely perceptible act. Obi-Wan nodded to himself. Somewhere, he thought, Qui-Gon Jinn would be smiling.

Across the way, Mace Windu stood with Yoda, his strong dark face contemplative as he watched Obi-Wan put his hand on Anakin Skywalker's shoulder.

"One life ends and a new one begins in the Jedi order," he murmured, almost to himself.

Yoda hunched forward, leaning on his gnarled staff, and shook his head. "Not so sure of this one as of Qui-Gon, do I feel. Troubled, he is. Wrapped in shadows and difficult choices."

Mace Windu nodded. He knew Yoda's feelings on the matter, but the Council had made its decision. "Obi-Wan will do a good job with him," he said, shifting the subject. "Qui-Gon was right. He is ready."

They knew of what the young Padawan had done to save himself from the Sith Lord in the melting pit after Qui-Gon had been struck down. It took an act of extraordinary courage and strength of will. Only a Jedi Knight fully in tune with the Force could have saved himself against such an adversary. Obi-Wan Kenobi had proved himself beyond everyone's expectations that day.

"Ready this time, he was," Yoda acknowledged grudgingly. "Ready to train the boy, he may not be."

"Defeating a Sith Lord in combat is a strong test of his readiness for anything," the Council leader pressed. His eyes stayed with Obi-Wan

and Anakin. "There is no doubt. The one who tested him was a Sith."

Yoda's sleepy eyes blinked. "Always two there are. No more, no less. A master and an apprentice."

Mace Windu nodded. "Then which one was destroyed, do you think—the master or the apprentice?"

They looked at each other now, but neither could provide an answer to the question.

That night Darth Sidious stood alone on a balcony overlooking the city, a shadowy figure amid the multitude of twinkling lights, his visage dark and angry as he contemplated the loss of his apprentice. Years of training had gone into the preparation of Darth Maul as a Sith Lord. He had been more than the equal of the Jedi Knights he had faced and should have been able to defeat them easily. It was bad luck and chance that had led to his death, a combination that even the power of the dark side could not always overcome.

Not in the short run, at least.

His brow furrowed. It would be necessary to replace Darth Maul. He would need to train another apprentice. Such a one would not be easy to find.

Darth Sidious walked to the railing and put his hands on the cool metal. One thing was certain. Those responsible for killing Darth Maul would be held accountable. Those who had opposed him would not be forgotten. All would be made to pay.

His eyes glittered. Still, he had gotten what he wanted most from this business. Even the loss of Darth Maul was worth that. He would bide his time. He would wait for his chance. He would lay the groundwork for what was needed.

A smile played across his thin lips. A day of reckoning would come about soon enough.

There was a grand parade the following day to publicly recognize the newfound alliance of the Naboo and Gungan peoples, to celebrate their hard-fought victory over the Trade Federation invaders, and to honor those who had fought to secure the planet's freedom. Crowds lined the streets of Theed as columns of Gungan warriors astride kaadu and Naboo soldiers aboard speeders rode through the city to the sounds of cheering and singing. Fambaa lumbered down the avenues, draped in rich silks and embroidered harnesses, heads weaving from side to side on long necks. Here and there, a captured Federation tank hovered amidst the marchers, Naboo and Gungan flags flying from cannons and hatchways. Jar Jar Binks and General Ceel led the Gungans, both riding their kaadu, Jar Jar managing to stay aboard this time for the entire parade, though he looked to those in attendance to be having a bit of trouble doing so.

Captain Panaka and the Queen's own guards stood at the top of the stone steps in the central plaza, watching the parade approach. Panaka's uniform was creased, metal insignia on his epaulets gleaming, proud and strong.

Anakin Skywalker stood with Obi-Wan Kenobi near the Queen. He was feeling out of place and embarrassed. He thought the parade wonderful, and he appreciated being honored with the others, but his mind was elsewhere.

It was with Qui-Gon, gone back into the Force.

It was with Padmé, who had barely spoken to him since he had been accepted for training by the Jedi Council.

It was with his home, to which he might never return.

It was with his mother, whom he wished could see him now.

He wore the clothing of a Jedi Padawan, his hair cut short in the Padawan style, a student in training to become a Knight of the order. He had achieved all that he had hoped in coming with Qui-Gon to Coruscant and beyond. He should have been happy and satisfied, and he was. But his happiness and satisfaction were clouded by the sadness he could not banish at losing Qui-Gon and his mother both. They were lost to him in different ways, to be sure, but they were gone out of his life. Qui-Gon had provided the stability he required to leave his mother behind. With the Jedi Master's death, Anakin was left adrift. There was no one who could give him the grounding that Qui-Gon had provided—not Obi-Wan, not even Padmé. One day, perhaps. One day, each of them would play a part in his life that would change him forever. He could sense that. But for now, when it mattered most, he felt all alone.

So he smiled, but he was sick in spirit and lost in his heart.

Perhaps sensing his discomfort, Obi-Wan reached over to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's the beginning of a new life for you, Anakin," he ventured.

The boy smiled back dutifully, but said nothing.

Obi-Wan looked off at the crowds in front of them. "Qui-Gon always disdained celebrations. But he understood the need for them, as well. I wonder what he would have made of this one."

Anakin shrugged.

The Jedi smiled. "He would have been proud to see you a part of it."

The boy looked at him. "Do you think so?"

"I do. Your mother would be proud of you as well."

Anakin's mouth tightened, and he looked away. "I wish she was here. I miss her."

The Jedi's hand tightened on his shoulder. "One day you will see her again. But when you do, you will be a Jedi Knight."

The parade wound through the central plaza to where the Queen and her guests viewed the procession. She stood with her handmaidens, Governor Sio Bibble, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, Boss Nass of the Gungans, and the twelve members of the Jedi Council. R2-D2 occupied a space just below the handmaidens and next to Anakin and Obi-Wan, domed head swiveling from side to side, lights blinking as his sensors took everything in.

R2 beeped at the boy, and Anakin touched the little droid's shell gently.

Boss Nass stepped forward and held the Globe of Peace high over his head. "Dis grand party!" an exuberant Jar Jar shouted above the noise of cheering and clapping. "Gungans and Naboo, dey be friends forever, hey?"

His enthusiasm made Anakin smile in spite of himself. The Gungan was dancing up and down, long ears flapping, gangly limbs twisting this way and that as he mounted the steps. Jar Jar would never let the bad things in life get him down, the boy thought. Maybe there was a lesson to be learned in that.

"We bombad heroes, Annie!" Jar Jar laughed, lifting his arms over his head and showing all his teeth.

The boy laughed. He guessed maybe they were.

On the broad avenue below, in a long, colorful ribbon of life, the parade that had carried them to this place and time continued on.

A CONVERSATION WITH TERRY BROOKS

Del Rey: A lot of people were surprised to learn that Terry Brooks would be doing the novelization of *The Phantom Menace*. You're known as a fantasy writer, while *Star Wars*, as we all know, is science fiction. What convinced George Lucas that you were the right man for the job?

Terry Brooks: It's hard to know exactly why George selected me for the work on adapting *TPM*. It wasn't something we discussed. He did say he was very familiar with my work, and I'm sure as well that he held some discussions with the people at Del Rey Books. Also, our connection goes all the way back to 1977, when both *Star Wars* and *Sword of Shannara* were published under the guidance of Del Rey editor in chief Judy-Lynn del Rey. Judy-Lynn believed strongly in both projects, and she used to talk to me about *Star Wars* and George and to George about *Sword* and me. Perhaps something of that carried over. I would add that Judy-Lynn and her husband, Lester, placed a high premium on storytelling. I think they found solid storytelling components in both *Sword* and *Star Wars*, and that was what attracted Judy-Lynn to both. As for my writing science fiction, I asked George about that as well. He said, "Don't worry, I don't make science fiction movies." He views *Star Wars*, as I do, as adventure storytelling. I agreed with him. I write adventure stories, so the transition was pretty easy.

DR: I can't help feeling it's more than coincidence that *SW* and *Sword* appeared in 1977 to such phenomenal success. It's as if both the movie and the novel tapped into something similar in their audiences, a powerful (though perhaps unconscious) need for mythic heroes that other artists of the time simply weren't recognizing or responding to.

TB: It was Lester del Rey's firm belief that publishing was ignoring fantasy as a viable form of commercial fiction. It was believed at that time that only Tolkien would sell to a large market and that fantasy in general couldn't find a sizable audience. Lester believed the prevailing opinion was wrong. It was with this in mind that he published *Sword* and proved his point. You might argue that *Star Wars* made the same point regarding space opera in movies. Both opened the door to a whole raft of other books and movies grounded in adventure storytelling that turned out to be very successful and changed the face of book writing and movie making. For example, look at how much

mainstream fiction relies on fantasy techniques to sustain plot.

DR: By “fantasy techniques,” do you mean the use of magic and similar fantastic elements, or are you referring to literary techniques employed by fantasy writers?

TB: I’m referring to the use of magic or similar fantasy elements. Fantasy writers have no literary techniques. [laughs]

DR: What’s it like to adapt a movie into a book? Do you go through the screenplay line by line, turning it into narrative prose, or is the process less straightforward? How much freedom did you have with *TPM*?

TB: George told me right from the first that he wanted to see me take a different approach to adapting his movie. He had originally thought to tell the story from Anakin’s point of view. Could I do that in the book? I could write new material and have a free hand in adapting the movie. This is a hard challenge for a writer to ignore. I was very pleased to discover how much freedom I was going to have. So the book is actually an expansion of the movie. It begins in a new place and gives us more information on characters and background. Adapting movies into books isn’t as hard as it might seem. Mostly, you have to take a script containing dialogue and some brief scene-setting and expand it. I block out the script into chapters or scenes, then look for a way to do the story. You have to remember while you’re doing this that everything a moviegoer sees on the big screen, you have to describe with words in your book.

DR: You’re no stranger to the bestseller lists; unless I’m mistaken, in fact, all of your books have made the *New York Times* list. But *TPM* was the first to reach #1. Does it bother you at all that a novelization of someone else’s movie did better than your own fiction?

TB: Bite your tongue, Del Rey. As a matter of fact, *Wishsong of Shannara* was a #1 bestseller on the *New York Times* trade paperback bestseller list in 1985. Six of the other books reached #2 in hardback. So I haven’t suffered too badly. Nor would I agree that the *Star Wars* book has done better than my own fiction. I wouldn’t have taken the job of adapting it if I thought that would be the case. There are various measuring sticks of success, and the one I rely on most completely is how close I feel to the material. While I enjoyed doing *TPM*, no way could I ever feel closer to someone else’s material than I do to my own. George would understand this, I think.

DR: Some writers work from an outline that they develop rigorously beforehand and then follow religiously from the first page to the last, while others wander wherever inspiration leads them. What about you?

TB: I'm fairly famous (or infamous) for my stand on this issue. I believe strongly in approaching your work from an outline. I believe, especially with long fiction, that an outline keeps you organized and focused over the course of the writing. I am not wedded to an outline once it is in place and will change it to suit the progress of the story and to accommodate new and better ideas, but I like having that blueprint to go back to. Also, having an outline forces you to think your story through and work out the kinks and bad spots. I do a lot less editing and rewriting when I take time to do the outline first.

DR: A lot of people have the idea that writers work by pure inspiration, waiting for the muse to strike and then churning out a novel in a feverish burst of creativity.

TB: A lot of people would be wrong. Still, many writers do write on inspiration because outlining just doesn't work for them. Writers approach their material and their jobs in different ways. But I believe most beginning writers would be better served in their efforts to write something publishable by doing as much preparation as they can.

DR: How should a beginning writer approach the task of outlining a novel, and how specific should that outline be? This is a subject that many creative writing courses don't address, unfortunately.

TB: I usually cover this in an hourlong speech. However, in twenty-five words or thereabouts, the best approach is to do a chapter-by-chapter outline that at least hits the high points of the writer's story arc, considering which characters will appear, what subject matter will be addressed, what point of view will be used, and how each chapter will end. I also favor at least a paragraph workup on each major character. Even before that, I suggest living with your story and characters in your head for a while before you start to write even a single word.

DR: *Angel Fire East*, the final volume of the contemporary fantasy trilogy that began with *Running with the Demon* and continued in *A Knight of the Word*, is your latest book. It's a wonderful title, full of poetry and mystery. How does it relate to the novel? And can you say something about the importance of titles in your

work?

TB: Titles are important to me, although I would hasten to say that a lot of mine have been changed by the publisher because they didn't work in marketing the book. *Angel Fire East* was not changed, and it speaks to the book as completely as the other two titles in the Word & Void series. It comes from a story in the book that a young mother tells her little girl about angels gathering up each night all the love mothers have for their children to give light to the sun at the beginning of a new day.

DR: Were you told that story as a boy?

TB: No, I made it up myself.

DR: John Ross, the Knight of the Word, is a truly memorable creation. Both empowered and crippled by a gift of magic, he is doomed to visit in his dreams a horrific future that will come to pass for all humankind unless he acts now, in the present, to prevent it. His life is one of sacrifice and loneliness, of endless battles fought against the evil servants of the Void. You seem drawn to complicated characters such as this, men and women who are full of contradictions, blessed and cursed with knowledge and power. The Druid Allanon from the Shannara books comes to mind as well. What is it about characters like John Ross and Allanon that interests you as a writer?

TB: Good question. I'm sure extensive therapy will eventually yield an answer. I'm drawn to characters like these, people who are conflicted and full of contradictions. Clearly, they most closely mirror the people we know in real life who intrigue us. I am also drawn to people who are given vast power and responsibility and must wield it wisely. They don't, always. Sometimes it proves too much for them. Sometimes they fail. It always takes a toll on them, because an exercise of power is emotionally and physically draining by nature. How these people cope, like John Ross and Allanon, offers great opportunities for storytelling and an examination of ourselves and our own lives.

DR: So you are telling more than "just" adventure stories.

TB: You would be surprised at what I am telling you. But on the most basic level, I am always telling an adventure story first.

DR: What makes a good adventure story?

TB: A good writer. No, I'm serious!

DR: The Shannara series is one of the most popular fantasies since *The Lord of the Rings*, to which it's often compared. Do you feel a debt to Tolkien? A sense of competition?

TB: I am always flattered when Shannara is compared to *LOTR*. I don't think they are all that much alike, save on a very superficial basis. Tolkien was working from an entirely different point of view and place than I am. That being said, he is the master, and virtually every writer working in fantasy today has read him and is indebted to him.

DR: Why then, beyond the superficial resemblance to *LOTR*, did the Shannara books strike such a nerve with readers?

TB : The Shannara books are big, historical family sagas set in an imaginary world in which magic has replaced science. Their primary strength is in the storytelling. As I've mentioned earlier, that was what drew the del Reys to *Sword* in the first place. I think readers like to be taken on journeys to strange, exotic places and made to feel as if they are part of what is happening. They want to experience the excitement and fear and doubt and exhilaration of the book's characters. I think that's something I've learned how to do.

DR: You're now embarking on a continuation of the saga, with five new novels forthcoming from Del Rey over the next few years. Can you give us some idea of where you will be taking the series?

TB: The first three books in the new grouping will take us on a journey outside the Four Lands and home again. That's about all I can tell you. I don't like talking about books I haven't written. I think it drains the energy out of them if I do.

DR: Any chance of Shannara being made into a movie?

TB: There is always a chance. Of course, there is a chance I might be elected president, too. Seriously, there has always been interest in the Shannara books, and one day someone might do something with one or more. But they are big, sprawling tales and they don't lend themselves well to a two-hour format. So movies are a tough medium in which to adapt them. We'll see.

DR: The Word & Void books might be better movie material. I can picture actors fighting over the juicy role of John Ross!

TB: That was my thinking. I still think that one of these books will get made into a movie before any of the *Shannaras*.

DR: Like John Grisham and others, you were a practicing lawyer before becoming a successful writer. Are all lawyers frustrated writers?

TB: All lawyers are frustrated period. There's a lot of writing involved in being a lawyer, but I don't know that it's necessarily good writing. Nor does being a lawyer always foster good storytelling. No more so than any other profession.

DR: Any advice for aspiring writers—or lawyers—in the audience?

TB: Ten words: "Read, read, read. Outline, outline, outline. Write, write, write. Repeat."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TERRY BROOKS is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty books, including the Genesis of Shannara novels *Armageddon's Children*, *The Elves of Cintra*, and *The Gypsy Morph*; *The Sword of Shannara*; the Voyage of the Jerle Shannara trilogy: *Ilse Witch*, *Antrax*, and *Morgawr*; the High Druid of Shannara trilogy: *Jarka Ruus*, *Tanequil*, and *Straken*; the nonfiction book *Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life*; and the novel based upon the screenplay and story by George Lucas, *Star Wars*:® Episode I *The Phantom Menace*.™ His novels *Running with the Demon* and *A Knight of the Word* were selected by the *Rocky Mountain News* as two of the best science fiction/fantasy novels of the twentieth century. The author was a practicing attorney for many years but now writes full-time. He lives with his wife, Judine, in the Pacific Northwest.

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BY TERRY BROOKS

SHANNARA

First King of Shannara
The Sword of Shannara
The Elfstones of Shannara
The Wishsong of Shannara

THE HERITAGE OF SHANNARA

The Scions of Shannara
The Druid of Shannara
The Elf Queen of Shannara
The Talismans of Shannara

THE VOYAGE OF THE JERLE SHANNARA

Ilse Witch
Antrax
Morgawr

HIGH DRUID OF SHANNARA

Jarka Ruus
Tanequil
Straken

GENESIS OF SHANNARA

Armageddon's Children
The Elves of Cintra
The Gypsy Morph
Legends of Shannara
Beareres of the Black Staff
The World of Shannara

THE MAGIC KINGDOM OF LANDOVER

Magic Kingdom for Sale—Sold!
The Black Unicorn
Wizard at Large
The Tangle Box
Witches' Brew
A Princess of Landover

THE WORD AND THE VOID

Running with the Demon
A Knight of the Word
Angel Fire East

As the shadow of the Trade Federation spreads over Naboo, a streak of darkness cuts through the Federation's heart.

For Darth Sidious has sent his apprentice to oversee the annihilation of Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, plunging the galaxy into war and announcing the presence of the Sith to the Jedi.

The balance between dark and light is on a precarious edge, and for Darth Maul, the beginning may actually be the

END GAME

A new Darth Maul short story by James Luceno

The Sith Infiltrator was in hyperspace when Darth Maul engaged the autopilot to give himself time to think. Reflection was so foreign to him that the impulse to look inward left him momentarily astonished—though not enough to keep him seated at the ship's controls. Shrugging out of the acceleration chair's harness, he rose and paced from the control console to the aft arc of passenger seats; then from the entrance of the lift to the power-cell array access panels. Though Tatooine was light-years behind him, he couldn't shake the planet from his thoughts, and despite the *Scimitar's* speed and cloaking ability, it was as if the sleek ship, too, were incapable of outracing the past.

If I had it to do over again ...

In his thoughts he was dropped into the speeder bike's open cockpit, racing across Tatooine's desolate landscape; in the next moment, executing an impromptu though acrobatic leap that carried him to the yellow ground, his lightsaber in hand, its energy blade meeting that of the Jedi Master whose name he had since learned was Qui-Gon Jinn.

Probe droids Maul had dispatched upon landing on Tatooine had located the bearded human Jedi in the stands of the Podrace stadium and later in the settlement known as Mos Espa. One of the trio of Dark Eyes had also discovered the Queen of Naboo's starship where it had put down in the wastes of the Xelric Draw. Intent on availing himself of every advantage, Maul had waited for Qui-Gon to set out on foot for the gleaming ship before launching his surprise attack. Qui-Gon and a human slave boy had hurried across the oven-like wastes while Maul watched from the padded comfort of the speeder's seat. Maul's eyes were better adapted than human eyes to the glare of Tatooine's twin suns, his lithe body better suited than the Jedi heavyweight's to fighting in soft sand ...

And yet nothing had gone as planned.

Somehow Qui-Gon heard the sibilant whine of the speeder's repulsorlift and had whirled aside at the last instant. With some 250 meters separating Qui-Gon and the slave boy from Queen Amidala's vessel, Maul would have had time to whip the speeder through a turn and make a second pass. Instead, in his eagerness to face off at last with a celebrated Jedi lightsaber Master, he had leapt into action ...

Qui-Gon's shrewd readiness had almost taken Maul off his guard. But the first ferocious clash of their blades had told him that the Jedi was equally surprised. And why shouldn't he be—about being attacked not only by a Dathomiri Zabrak who had appeared out of nowhere, but also by one trained in the dark arts and wielding a crimson-bladed lightsaber? Regardless, Qui-Gon had quieted his mind and brought his imposing might to bear against Maul's agility. He had matched Maul's furious strokes with a disciplined intensity all his own. In the midst of their no-quarter contest the Jedi had even managed to order the slave boy to flee for the safety of the waiting ship, where Maul had nearly forgotten all about him.

The Force favors this Jedi! Maul recalled thinking.

After all the droids, assassins, gangsters, and soldiers he had vanquished, finally a worthy opponent. Not since he had fought and been defeated by his own Master, Darth Sidious, had Maul been so committed to a challenge.

Then, just when Qui-Gon's stamina was beginning to flag and the fight was tipping in Maul's favor, the incomprehensible had occurred: *Qui-Gon had fled*. Instead of standing fast and fighting to the finish, he had bounded onto the lowered boarding ramp of the Royal Starship as it was lifting off, leaving Maul—sandblasted as much by disenchantment as raw anger—to watch the craft disappear into Tatooine's blue sky.

Many a being had run from Maul, but never a worthy one.

When, on orders from his Master, he had single-handedly butchered the trainers and trainees at the Orsis combat academy five years earlier, not a being had fled. Not the Mandalorian Meltech nor his pair of lethal Rodians; not Trezza or his well-trained Nautolan ward, Kilindi. All had stood their ground and died with honor. Spinelessness was something that had never entered Maul's imaginings. What, then, was he now supposed to think of the Jedi, whom he had been raised to hate since infancy?

On Coruscant, before leaving for Tatooine, Maul had found it impossible to contain his enthusiasm. *At last we reveal ourselves, Master*, he had said to Sidious. And in the end that long-awaited moment of revelation had led to nothing more than disappointment. Watching the departing starship, Maul had wondered: Could he succeed in tracking the Jedi and the Queen a second time? How would

his failure impact the overall mission?

At the time he had tried to make excuses for himself, blaming his inability to overpower Qui-Gon on the leg wound he had sustained during his brief capture by Togorian pirates. Or the slave boy might have been to blame—a seeming nexus of Force energy, the boy had somehow abetted Qui-Gon in the fight. But Maul had known better than to make excuses to his Master, or even mention the run-in with the Togorians.

But *if* he had it to do over again, he wouldn't make it a challenge.

Even if that meant depriving himself of the thrill of combat and the pleasure of seeing the pained surprise in Qui-Gon's eyes when Maul's blade pierced him. He would simply race in at top speed with his lightsaber already ignited and decapitate Qui-Gon Jinn where he stood. That way he might also have been able to pilot the speeder through the ship's open hatch, kill Qui-Gon's Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and capture the Queen ...

How his Master would have praised him then! Instead Maul had been forced to weather Sidious's obvious disenchantment in abject humiliation. Darth Sidious had dismissed the setback, almost as if attributing Maul's failure to—what? Surely not *fate*, since his Master was as much as overseeing that. That left only Maul's lack of ability.

His *weakness*.

Currently the two Jedi, the Queen, and her entourage of handmaidens and protectors were on Coruscant, and Maul had been ordered to Naboo to assist the loathsome Neimoidians in rooting out possible pockets of resistance while Sidious modified the plan.

Even Sidious despised having to deal with the Neimoidians. So the assignment to advise them felt like a punishment, as had happened following Maul's massacre of the leaders of the Black Sun crime syndicate. Then Maul had been banished from Coruscant after confessing to Sidious that he had identified himself as a Sith Lord to one of the crime bosses before killing him.

In previous missions undertaken for his Master, Maul had felt allied to the dark side, but something had changed since Tatooine. Was he now in some sense engaging the Force itself, through its proxies, the Jedi? Should he have been more circumspect and lured the Jedi to him instead of initiating the attack?

Would his Master even allow him a second chance?

He wouldn't have believed that his hatred for the Jedi could deepen, but it had—for making him appear ineffectual in the eyes of Darth Sidious and for putting him in such an untenable fix ...

Enough thinking, Maul commanded himself.

The solution was that he couldn't allow himself to fail again.

Convinced that he had put the past to rest, Maul came to a halt in

the Infiltrator's cabin. However, as if his legs had a will of their own, he was suddenly back in motion, pacing from the control console to the acceleration chairs.

If I had it to do over again ...

Holoimages of Naboo didn't do it justice.

A blue-green gem in an otherwise lackluster star system, the planet was one of the most pristine Maul had ever seen. This was as it should be, being the homeworld of Darth Sidious in his guise as Senator—perhaps soon to be Supreme Chancellor—Palpatine. Years earlier Maul had fallen prey to a plot that would have returned him to the world of his birth, Dathomir, but he had foiled the designs of his Nightsister abductors and pledged never to give thought to the life he might have led had he not been raised and trained by Sidious. As far as he was concerned, his homeworld was volcanic Mustafar, where he had fittingly been forged in fire.

Integral to his Master's plan, the Trade Federation's blockade of Naboo had been in the works for several years. The plan had required positioning Viceroy Nute Gunray as director of the shipping cartel, and manipulating the Republic Senate into allowing the Neimoidians to defend the enormous ships of their fleet with combat automata and other war machines. But the Senate had yet to learn the lengths to which the Trade Federation had gone to arm itself. The blockade had been in effect for some time when Sidious had ordered the Neimoidians to invade and occupy the planet, in response to the Jedi Order's attempt to intervene in the dispute. Attempts had been made on the lives of Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, but the Neimoidians had proved no match for the Jedi, and so the Forceful duo had managed to spirit Queen Amidala safely off Naboo.

The blockade had initially numbered hundreds of vessels, but Maul realized on arriving at Naboo that the Neimoidians—ever fretful about diminished profits—had since returned almost all of their ships to the business of intergalactic transport. Well, they were nothing more than merchants, he reminded himself, but their greediness offended him almost as much as Qui-Gon's cowardice.

At Tatooine it hadn't been necessary to employ the *Scimitar's* cloaking capabilities, but Maul did so now in order to maneuver the ship into the core of what remained of the Trade Federation armada, which consisted of half a dozen freighters and a single ring-shaped *Lucrehulk*-class control ship, which oversaw all elements of the Neimoidians' droid army. Though formidable, the control ship was not impregnable, and the shoddiness of the operation sickened him. A stealth team made up of agents of the sort Trezza had trained on Orsis would have been able to infiltrate the vessel easily and destroy it from

within, essentially paralyzing the Trade Federation's entire force.

Maul was certain he could penetrate the ship on his own, and was sorely tempted to, if only to rub Gunray's muzzled face in the flaws of his strategy. But he contented himself with piloting the Infiltrator to well within firing range of the control ship and a squadron of drone starfighters, without the Neimoidians even being aware of his presence.

Maul took the *Scimitar* through a low and slow orbit around Naboo, studying aerial close-ups of the northern continent's grassy flatlands, lush hills, and extensive swamps and lakes. The galaxy boasted many such scenic wonders, but what made Naboo unique—and had in some sense doomed it—was the planet's plasma core, and the maze of underground tunnels and caverns the seething magma had fashioned. Those corridors, however, were not visible from above, save for various entry points to underground oceans that were allegedly rife with behemoth aquatic creatures, and home to an indigenous species of amphibian humanoids who resided in bubble cities maintained by plasma technology.

Once Darth Sidious had issued the command to invade Naboo, the assault and subsequent occupation had happened quickly—in part because of Queen Amidala's unwillingness to fight back. Not, in any case, that Naboo's small space force would have stood a chance against the Trade Federation army. Amidala may have been convinced that the Neimoidians were bluffing—which they certainly would have been without the goading of a Sith Lord—but even when the first landing ships had begun to disgorge antigrav tanks and thousands of infantry droids, the young Queen had ordered the Naboo Royal Security Forces to stand down and surrender. Only Viceroy Gunray's concern for the Trade Federation's galactic reputation had kept the invasion from turning into a slaughter. And only a fluke had allowed Amidala's starship to breach the blockade.

Maul flew the invisible ship over several sprawling makeshift detention centers, where the entire populations of some of Naboo's compact cities were now imprisoned and forced to answer to battle droids. Employing coordinates furnished by Darth Sidious, he set the *Scimitar* down outside the principal city of Theed, in a private hangar Sidious had assured him was secure.

Maul used his wrist link to program his trio of probe droids to monitor the hangar, then extracted the horseshoe-shaped speeder bike from its proprietary enclosure in the underside of the forward port-side cargo hatch. Clothed in black robes and a hooded field cloak, he straddled the speeder and aimed it for Theed.

The deserted city of stately domes and elegant spires struck him as

an artifact—or perhaps a quaint historical replica closed for routine maintenance. Squads of B1 battle droids armed with blaster rifles patrolled the narrow streets and stood sentry outside the Theed Palace and other major buildings. Evading them effortlessly, Maul timed the patrols, made note of their numbers, and used the Force to create sounds that tricked the droids into moving in one direction or another. The idea of using droids as combatants annoyed him, for droids were only as good as their programming, and the bipedal, slender-headed B1 had limited skills and no ability to perform autonomously. Only the fact that the droids, too, were integral to his Master's more far-reaching plan kept Maul from revulsion. The deeper he ventured into the galaxy, the less honor he found. But the Sith would redress that deficit once the Jedi were exterminated and the Republic brought down.

Maul stowed the speeder in an alley that ran alongside Theed's space force hangar, which was perched on the edge of an escarpment. Inside the domed building he took stock of Naboo's smart yellow-and-chromium Nubian fighters, neatly arranged in berths on several tiers, with an R2 astromech droid assigned to each ship. Despite the success of the occupation, the Neimoidians would have been wise to disable the fighters, but they were apparently incapable of tampering with anything of value. As with the control ship, Maul was tempted to show them the error of their ways, but again he did nothing.

Emerging from the hangar, he allowed himself to be detected and confronted by a patrol of droids. In a metallic voice, their officer unit ordered him to halt and raised its E-5 rifle. Reared by Darth Sidious's custodial droids on Mustafar, Maul—for many years—had had a complex relationship with droids of any sort. Certainly his fascination with technology owed in part to the circumstances of his abnormal upbringing, but he had no compunction about destroying droids when the need arose, whether in training sessions or on missions. Still, he derived no enduring satisfaction from the contests, even when combating the most sophisticated among them.

Calling his long lightsaber to his hand, he made short work of the squad, decapitating them with his blade or exploding them by deflecting blaster bolts back at them. The brief altercation drew several more patrols, the members of which he similarly dismembered. Then he went on the hunt for a red-emblazoned security unit, and when he found one he clamped his gloved hands around the thing's canted neck and ordered it to establish contact with Viceroy Gunray. When the droid became unresponsive he snapped its head off and used it as he might a comlink, demanding that the Neimoidian technician with whom he eventually spoke relay the communication directly to Gunray.

After a long moment, a patronizing voice issued from the battle droid's vocoder.

"Lord Maul," Gunray said, "we were not aware that you had arrived."

"Of course you weren't," Maul growled.

"How may we be of service?"

Maul squeezed the head so tightly, it began to fold in on itself.

"You can begin by making certain that every droid on Naboo responds to me as its chief commander, Viceroy. Or I will reduce this fine army of yours to a mountain of scrap."

Maul paced the polished stone floor of the Theed Palace throne room in brooding silence, his lightsaber affixed to the black leather cummerbund that cinched his robes. Draped in shimmersilk, Nute Gunray and his green-skinned diplomatic attaché, Rune Haako, stood alongside each other before a tall, arch-topped window, wringing their thick-fingered hands. A silver protocol droid attended them, and a mechno-chair awaited the viceroy's pleasure.

"Several members of the Queen's Security Forces managed to elude our battle droids," Gunray was saying in wheedling Basic. "They rescued a group of Naboo captives, and caused us some concern on an orbital station and at one of our plasma transshipment sites on the surface. Fortunately for us—and unfortunately for them—the Naboo fell in with a visiting Hutt who happens to be in our employ. He betrayed their plans and location."

"They're dead or imprisoned?" Maul stopped to ask.

"The captain is dead. Some of the others are still at large."

Maul resumed his angry pacing. He was familiar with both Neimoidians from holotransmissions conducted between them and Darth Sidious during the past year. They had dealt with Sidious from across cold space, but now, confronted with a flesh-and-blood Sith Lord, it was all they could do to keep from trembling in awe. A musky, low-tide odor wafted from Haako, who affected purple robes and a horned bonnet.

"And the Gungans?" Maul said.

The pair traded baffled looks. "What of them, Lord Maul?" Haako asked.

"You've located their underwater cities and taken the necessary steps?"

"We're ... in the process," Gunray said. A three-tined tiara crowned his mottled blue face.

"How many have you captured?"

The nictitating membrane of Gunray's red eyes spasmed. "How many?"

“Hundreds? Thousands?”

The viceroy improvised. “On the order of hundreds, I should think.”

Maul was revolted by the fact that he was in some measure responsible for Gunray’s lofty position, having executed missions that had elevated Gunray from a mere functionary to a being of galactic import. But Darth Sidious maintained that the Neimoidians were necessary to the Sith’s Grand Plan, and part of that plan called for Naboo to be secured, in preparation for the planet being annexed by the shipping cartel. With Queen Amidala on Coruscant, Naboo’s surrender was not yet official, but Maul was certain that his Master would find a way to bring it about.

“Where are the Gungan captives?” Maul said.

Again the Neimoidians glanced at each other. They knew that Maul had already killed their treacherous confederate, Hath Monchar, and grasped that he would kill again if provoked.

Gunray spoke first. “The corpses were dumped into the sea—”

“—atomized,” Haako said at the same time.

Maul showed each of them a withering glance. “Which is it—dumped or atomized?”

“Atomized, then dumped into the sea,” Gunray said, proud of himself.

Maul continued to glower at him. “You discarded atomized bodies.”

The air went out of Gunray for a moment; then he said: “The Gungans need not concern us.”

Maul folded his arms across his chest and bared his filed teeth. “Why is that, Viceroy?”

“The amphibians would not risk engaging our overwhelming force.”

Maul snorted. “The Gungans have a standing army thousands strong and strategic plasma weaponry.”

Gunray looked at Haako, who said, “We didn’t know—”

“Now you do.”

Maul watched the slimy duo shake in their robes. These were invaders? These were the leaders of an army? So easily cowed, so easily deceived, and covetous to the point that they had allowed themselves to be manipulated into instigating a war for a chance at increased profits. To them, wealth was an end unto itself. They had no understanding of real power, and seemingly no contact with the Force. They had more in common with the battle droids that served them than they had with sentient beings. How Trezza would have laughed. Sometimes Maul lamented having had to kill the Falleen. But Trezza had learned too much about Maul’s powers ...

“Who is supervising the search for the Gungan cities?” he said at last.

“Commander OOM-Nine,” Gunray said.

“A droid,” Maul said. “The predecessor of your inept B-Ones.”

“A superior droid, Lord Maul,” Haako was quick to point out. “Viceroy Gunray’s personal guard.”

Maul ignored him and spoke to Gunray. “Inform OOM-Nine that I am assuming command of the search.”

Maul demanded the most from the speeder bike as he left the plains and the Gallo Mountains behind and raced down through dense forest and into the swamplands to the south. Before leaving Theed he had communicated with Darth Sidious; he had reason to believe that the mistakes he’d made on Tatooine had been forgiven, and that his mission was back on track. With the Republic Senate in turmoil, Sidious was confident that he would be able to persuade Queen Amidala to return to Naboo, and he suspected that Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi would accompany her. But Maul’s excitement at the prospect of having a second go at them was dimmed by having to deal with the Gungans—business that had been entrusted to the Neimoidians. Surely Sidious knew that Gunray was incapable of doing what had been asked of him, and yet Sidious had kept vital information from the viceroy that would have enabled him to locate the underwater cities of the indigenes. Why, then, had Sidious provided the information to Maul now? Was this yet another in the series of tests his Master had put him through over the past five years to substantiate his loyalty and skill?

The question rode with him into the forward observation base OOM-9 had established on the shore of an insect-plagued marsh. The forest was tall here, and the slender trees seemed to grow from the fetid water itself. In a clearing, a full company of battle droids waited in precise ranks, augmented by a dozen droidekas. Other droids were scouting the marsh on Single Trooper Aerial Platforms. Close to the shore hovered a clamshell-shaped aquatic destroyer equipped with arrays of short-range lasers and tank-like siege engines.

Maul was impressed. The scene at least had the appearance of a legitimate military exercise.

OOM-9 approached as he was dismounting the speeder bike. “Welcome, Commander,” it said in a forthright way.

Its chest plastron emblazoned with yellow markings, OOM-9 boasted multiple antennae and a backpack that boosted its operational range. Maul knew that the droid had been tasked with spearheading the occupation and was credited with having razed Naboo communications centers at New Centrif and Vis, as well as having secured the cities of Harte Secur, Spinnaker, and Theed. From a captured mariner in Harte Secur, OOM-9 had learned of a Gungan bubble city called Rellias, but its forces had thus far been unable to

locate the city.

“Viceroy Gunray said that you have already captured many Gungans,” Maul said. “Exactly how many?”

The droid’s processor hummed faintly as it communicated with computers aboard the orbiting control ship. “How many did the viceroy say we captured?” it asked in a grating monotone.

“Forty-seven,” Maul told it.

“Yes, Commander. We captured forty-seven.”

Maul frowned in exasperation, but forgave OOM-9 the lie. “Show me to them.”

The droid pivoted through a half circle and turned its thin head back toward Maul. “This way, Commander.”

A short winding trail through the trees led to a place where four Gungans were laid out on the ground, their cartilaginous bodies holed by blaster bolts. With their billed faces, floppy ears, stalked eyes, and lolling tongues, they certainly didn’t look capable of waging war, but Sidious had warned Maul not to underestimate the species.

“These Gungans were apprehended while exchanging goods with Naboo traders outside the city of Moenia,” OOM-9 explained.

“Where are the Naboo traders?”

“Confined in Detention Camp Six, Commander.”

Maul took a moment to observe a STAP patrol buzzing overhead. “You’ve found no signs of Rellias?”

“None, Commander. It’s possible that the Gungans have devices capable of foiling our penetrating scanners.”

Maul considered it. However slight, there was a chance the Gungans were capable of doing something that could jeopardize his task of killing the Jedi and capturing the Queen, and he couldn’t have that.

“This isn’t the time for subtlety,” he told OOM-9. “Poison the waters. If that doesn’t bring the Gungans to the surface, then drain the marsh.”

Maul took the speeder bike out of the lowlands, following a twisting path that climbed back into the lush foothills of the Gallo range. Farms began to appear, with stately old houses set far back from the roadbed. Reasoning that revolt of any sort would likely begin in one of the cities, the Neimoidians hadn’t sent their droids into the area. But clearly the Naboo farmers were aware of what had happened elsewhere, as many of the houses were abandoned, and agricultural machines sat silently in the midst of furrowed fields.

Eventually Maul located the place Sidious had told him to seek out. Posted where the roadbed intersected the lane that accessed the house, a sign written in Basic and Futhork read: SUMMIT FARM BLOSSOM WINERY. Maul waited at the sign. East and west of the lane as far as he

could see spread field after field of cultivated plants, their vibrant flowers varying in color, size, and shape. The warm air was redolent with their heady fragrances. Maul swung the speeder bike over the lane and moved slowly toward the house. In some of the fields, Naboo men working alongside labor droids stopped what they were doing to watch him pass. One man set off in a run for the house, clearly to announce Maul's arrival.

The house was a well-cared-for building made of wood and stone, with a quaint peaked roof. Some distance from the house, two ancient windmills spun. In an outbuilding larger than the house, Maul could see extraction presses and wooden storage barrels. He had just brought the speeder to a halt when a short Naboo woman exited through the house's front door, wiping her hands on a work apron and appraising him openly. As sturdily built as her house, the woman had sharp features, piercing blue eyes, and close-cropped silver hair. The muscular worker who had tipped her off lingered behind, his posture indicating that he had a blaster tucked into the waistband of his pants, at the small of his back. Maul brought his left leg over the speeder's U-shaped saddle and stood for a moment, allowing the woman to study him while he peeled off his long black gloves and draped them over the steering bar.

"You've ridden a long way," she said. "You must be thirsty. Come inside."

She turned and walked back into the house. Her protector stepped away, allowing Maul to pass before following him inside. The interior was cool and dim and decorated with wooden furniture and other old things. The woman returned from a food preparation area and handed Maul a clear drink cooled by crushed ice. He took a small sip, testing it for poison, then drank the sweet liquid down in one long pull while the woman traded furtive glances with her bodyguard. With a nod of her pointed chin, she signaled the man to leave the room, but he didn't go far. When Maul handed her the empty glass, she gestured to a couch.

"Sit down, won't you? And tell me what I can do for you."

Maul didn't move. "I need location coordinates for the principal Gungan cities."

She blinked in surprise. "Who told you I have information of that sort?"

"Do you or don't you?"

She narrowed her eyes in understanding and showed him a fleeting, tight-lipped smile. "I knew the Neimoidians couldn't have pulled off something like this on their own. How long have you been working with the Trade Federation?"

Maul glowered. "The Gungan cities."

"I'm afraid you've come all this way for nothing." Seeing the fire in Maul's yellow eyes, she quickly added: "Now, hold on a moment. Just because I don't know the coordinates, doesn't mean I don't know someone who does."

"Who?" Maul snapped.

She sat down on the couch. "First things first. Just how much do you know about me—or think you know?"

Maul stood over her. "Your name is Magneta. You were chief of security for the former King."

She forced a short exhale. "I'd ask your name, but I'm sure it wouldn't mean anything to me."

Maul went on. "Before the election of Queen Amidala, the King was planning to tap additional plasma reservoirs in the Gungan areas. He contracted with an offworld mining company to do the surveys, and was prepared to go to war with the Gungans if they resisted. He abdicated the throne before putting the plan into action."

"Abdicated," Magneta said, drawing out the word. "A curious way to put it. Do you know how King Veruna died?"

Maul fought to control his impatience. "I don't know and I don't care."

She studied his face. "Odd. When you rode up, I immediately figured you for the assassin we could never locate."

Maul snorted. "You figured wrong. Who knows the location of the underwater cities?"

Magneta sighed. "All right, have it your way. You'll want to talk to a Bothan named Leika. He's chief surveyor for the company King Veruna hired. But I'm not sure where he can be found. I've tried to keep an ear to the ground, but from here there's only so much I'm able to learn. Leika was preparing to leave Naboo when the Neimoidians sprang their surprise blockade. He tried to reason with them, but as with many other offworlders, he wasn't permitted to leave. No ships in or out, no exceptions. He was in Moenia when the invasion occurred, and no doubt he was caught up in it. So the first place I'd look would be in the closest detention camps."

Maul turned and headed for the door. He was about to go through it when Magneta said: "Be sure to give my regards to the Muun."

Maul stopped and swung slowly around. "What Muun?"

"Hego Damask."

He shook his head. "I don't know the name."

Magneta tipped her head to one side in suspicion. "I find that very unlikely, since I'm certain that Hego Damask and his puppet—Naboo's illustrious Senator Palpatine—have their arms to the elbows in this invasion and occupation."

Maul betrayed no surprise, even at the mention of his Master's alias.

“Who is Hego Damask?”

“Who is ...?” Magneta ran her eyes over his mask of a face. “You actually don’t know? Damask is a mobster masquerading as a banker. It was Damask who brokered the original deal to have Naboo’s plasma mined and shipped by the Trade Federation. I suspect he’s also the one behind Palpatine’s campaign for the chancellorship. They’ve been in collusion for over two decades.”

Maul was secretly stunned. He knew the names of some of Palpatine’s cohorts—Sate Pestage, Kinman Dorian, and others—but the name Hego Damask was new to him, as was Magneta’s assertion that the Muun was in some way *controlling* Palpatine. Was it possible that Darth Sidious himself had a clandestine Master? The idea was too far-fetched to contemplate, let alone accept.

“Ah, so I *have* touched on something,” Magneta said, watching him closely. “Then you might as well know the rest: There’s good reason to believe that Damask and Palpatine were the ones responsible for King Veruna’s death. They needed to install pretty little Amidala on the throne so they could take full control of the planet, while making it seem as if the Trade Federation were responsible.”

She paused, then added: “Palpatine double-crossed me, even after I allowed his agent, Pestage, to get away with the murder of more than a dozen pro-Gungan Naboo.” She gestured broadly. “Instead of being taken into the fold, I end up here, in humiliated self-exile for failing to save Veruna’s life.”

Maul knew something about humiliation. But Magneta had gone too far in airing her grievances, however justified. Palpatine could not be suspected of being tied to the Neimoidians or to the invasion of Naboo.

Maul heard Magneta’s bodyguard move, and Magneta, too—going for a hold-out blaster concealed beneath her apron. Maul was also aware that several field workers were gathered just outside the door, waiting to spring an ambush.

Snarling, he whirled, moving faster than human eyes could follow, breaking Magneta’s neck with the edge of his hand, then spinning again to send his stiffened right foot into the chest of the bodyguard as he rushed into the room. A hail of blaster bolts came through the front door. Dodging them, Maul ran across the room and dived headfirst through a window, somersaulting in midair so that he hit the ground on his feet, now centered among his astonished opponents.

Growling, he clenched his bare hands and set on them, killing one after another.

Battle droids stationed at the perimeter of Detention Camp Six, outside Moenia, brandished their blaster rifles as Maul sped into their

midst on the speeder bike. He was a split second from cutting them to pieces when their recognition programs kicked in and they assumed postures of salute.

“Welcome, Commander Maul,” their officer intoned. “What are your orders?”

Shoving past them, Maul crossed a footbridge that spanned a foul-smelling trench and entered a compound of hastily erected dormitories and flat-roofed dining halls. The area had been recently deforested, and Naboo’s sun beat down on the muddy ground. The relocated population of nearby Moenia was largely made up of artists, merchants, and Gungan sympathizers. Maul supposed that they were more accustomed to simple living than their counterparts in cosmopolitan Theed, who had never known privation, but they were an unhappy lot just the same. A droid administrator found the name Leika among the list of detainees, and a security droid escorted Maul to a dormitory the Bothan surveyor shared with twenty Naboo actors, a Rodian wilderness guide, and two Bith musicians.

A broad-nosed and bearded being of medium height, Leika went rigid with fright on seeing Maul enter the room and made straight for the cot he shared with one of the Naboo.

Maul stood akimbo at the foot of the cot. “Gather your belongings and follow me outside.”

“I—”

“Now!”

Over his hirsute shoulders the Bothan slung two small backpacks and hurried after Maul, who ushered him into an unoccupied storage building and closed the door behind them.

“I didn’t mean to be a bother to the viceroy,” Leika said in apology. “I was merely requesting permission to leave Naboo—”

“That doesn’t concern me.”

The Bothan frowned in confusion. “You are the Neimoidians’ executioner, are you not?”

“That depends on how much information you can provide regarding the location of the Gungan cities,” Maul said.

Leika’s eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with clear purpose. “If you can get me off Naboo, I’ll provide whatever information you require.”

Maul glanced at the backpacks. “First show me what you have, then I’ll give thought to your predicament.”

The Bothan dug into the smaller of the packs and fished out a projection crystal, which he inserted into a reader and set atop a storage container. Activated, the reader projected a 3-D map of Naboo’s swamplands and lakes.

“It took me more than a year to assemble these data,” Leika said. “I

should have abandoned the project when King Veruna died, but I was so obsessed with unraveling the mystery of the Gungan cities, I couldn't bring myself to stop. I was beginning to make real progress when the Trade Federation announced its blockade, and most of my informants went to ground."

"Rellias," Maul said. "Begin with that."

Leika made adjustments to the crystal reader, and a new 3-D map came into view. He pointed to a data entry that accompanied shifting views of a dense cluster of hydrostatic bubbles that made up the underwater city of Rellias.

"Here are the location coordinates." His furry hand moved. "The bubbles are permeable at certain points, and emit a natural glow that derives from the interaction between plasma and energy generated electromagnetically."

"The name of the governor of Rellias," Maul said.

"Boss," Leika amended. "Boss Ganne. An Ankura Gungan—the ones with green skin and hooded eyes."

Maul filed the name away. "How far to the bubble city closest to Rellias?"

Leika rocked his head back and forth. "Hard to say. Several of my sources confirmed that there is a fortified underwater plasma channel, somewhere in this area"—his forefinger drew a circle in the air—"that eventually leads to Otoh Gunga, Langua, Jahai, and the rest, which I believe to be in Lake Paonga, close to where it merges with the Lianorm Swamp. Otoh Gunga is the capital, if you will, and home to the Rep Council and the high ruler, Boss Rugor Nass. There is said to be a second approach to Otoh Gunga from the north, from a site called the Sacred Place."

Maul turned away from the projected map to regard Leika. "The Sacred Place?"

The Bothan shrugged. "No one I spoke with knew why it's called that, or precisely where it is." He paused for a moment. "Are you ... planning to attack the cities? I only ask because I feel compelled to warn you that the Gungans are well armed. Their standing army is what kept King Veruna from attacking them, and in part the impetus for his creating the Naboo Royal Space Fighter Corps. That, and to counter the strength of the Trade Federation."

"And to counter the power of the Muun, Hego Damask," Maul said, dangling the name.

If Leika was surprised, he kept it to himself. "Well, Magister Damask, of course. He controls all of it. Even the coming election on Coruscant."

"Damask will put Senator Palpatine in power?" Maul asked carefully.

“Naboo’s favorite son?” Leika laughed shortly. “Hasn’t Damask already done so?”

Maul didn’t want to hear any more about it. Snatching the data crystal and reader, he threw open the door and stepped into the light. Glancing at Leika, he said: “The terms will be honored.”

As he made his way out of the detention camp he thought about Darth Sidious, and it occurred to him to wonder if the terms of *their* agreement would be honored.

By the time Maul returned to OOM-9’s forward observation base, the dark waters of the marshland were clotted with poisoned gooberfish, and a stench hung in the humid air. The water level was lower, but not nearly as low as Maul had expected.

“As quickly as we drain it, the marsh replenishes itself, Commander,” the droid told him. “The marsh and the lakes beyond appear to be linked to vast reserves of underground water.”

Maul handed the data crystal to OOM-9. “The location coordinates for Rellias can be accessed from the menu. Transmit the data to your STAP patrols and order them to saturate the location with depth charges. Then prepare the S-DST for immediate embarkation and meet me on board.”

The droid accepted the crystal and hurried off.

Carrying half the company of droid troopers and the full contingent of droidekas, the aquatic destroyer hovered through a maze of channels shaded by thriving forest. By midafternoon it had maneuvered its way into a twisting passage that provided a link between the marsh and an enormous clear-water lake. Far to the west, two fingers of land jutted into the lake, forming a strait. Standing in the destroyer’s curved bow, Maul could see the STAPs buzzing back and forth beyond the narrows, raining explosives on the water. As the muffled reports of the depth charges reached him, he tried to compose himself for battle, but a welter of thoughts kept him from clearing his mind entirely.

Years earlier, on the same day Maul had been ordered to execute everyone at Trezza’s combat training center on Orsis, Darth Sidious had revealed that he was a Sith Lord. Before that, Maul had had no idea why or for what purpose he was being trained in the ways of the Force and in the dark side. Following the massacre, Darth Sidious had revealed more information about the Sith, including the fact that, for a millennium, there had never been more than two true Sith in any one era, a Master and an apprentice. *Allegedly*. Now, in the wake of the revelations about his Master’s possible alliance with Hego Damask, Maul asked himself: Had Sidious ever described himself as the *only* surviving Sith Master? Was it possible that this mysterious Muun,

Hego Damask, was also a Sith Lord, and that Maul—while given the title *lord* by Sidious—was in fact something less than a *true* Sith? Was that why, unlike Sidious, he had never been granted a secret identity comparable to his Master's guise as Palpatine? Was Maul, then, ultimately *expendable* to the Sith Grand Plan—a mere stealth agent and assassin?

Enough thinking! he told himself.

Simply all the more reason to prove himself to his Master—or possibly Masters. To demonstrate his worthiness so that he might be seen as a *true* Sith.

With the S-DST approaching the straits, Maul saw that stone fortifications had been erected on both fingers of land, and that from behind those bulwarks, spheres of faintly blue energy were being lobbed into the sky, decimating the STAP patrols. As the destroyer drew closer to the sandy shore, hundreds of orange- and purple-skinned Otolla Gungans appeared at the top of the walls, armed with energy lances and so-called plasmic boomers that could be hurled from baskets worn over one hand. Surfacing from the suddenly turbulent waters came a fleet of organically grown submersibles, whose weapons began to target the destroyer with orbs of destructive power.

The S-DST beached itself so that the droid troopers and droidekas could disembark. Rushing in to meet the hovercraft came a cavalry force made up of Gungans seated on two-legged wingless reptavians adorned with war feathers. Leading the charge were two green-skinned Ankura whom Maul assumed were Boss Ganne and his general. From the rear flew energy orbs launched from catapults strapped to the backs of beasts, whose sonorous calls reverberated across the lake. Battle droids marched out to face them, firing their E-5s continuously, and bolstered by the droidekas that wheeled toward the yelping riders, stopping only to fire from behind their individual deflector shields.

Maul leapt ashore. The horizontal hail of fire from the battle droids and the droidekas heated the air and conjured a breeze. STAPs fell from the sky like stones, and the energy spheres fountained water and dirt high into the air.

In planning his attack on the Orsis training camp, he had initially decided that his first kill should be Trezza. The Falleen had to be taken out while Maul was at the peak of his strength. Then the rest of the trainers and trainees could be seen to. But Maul hadn't stood by his decision, undermined by reluctance to kill the being who had in many ways been his only flesh-and-blood caregiver. As a consequence, he had come close to losing to Trezza when they had finally joined in hand-to-hand combat. Maul had promised himself that he wouldn't

make the same mistake twice. Mistakes were part of the past—mere lessons like those he had learned on Tatooine—and he knew what had to be done now.

Maul gazed into the sky, where only a few STAPs remained. The aerial platforms answered solely to their droid pilots, but he thought of a way to make use of them. Summoning one, Maul launched himself into the air with a Force jump as the STAP soared overhead. Dangling from the platform's starboard footrest with one hand, he called his lightsaber to the other, and ignited its blades.

Some of the Gungan riders saw him coming and took aim. Maul twisted his body, either evading flights of energy lances and spheres or fending them off with the lightsaber. Letting go of the STAP when he was still twenty meters from Ganne and the general, he called on the Force to send himself tearing through a score of mounted Gungans. It was clear that they had never seen anything like him. But then, who had? What Sith in the past thousand years had been allowed to wield a lightsaber in open battle? Was that in itself not enough to qualify him as a *true* Sith?

The rubbery Gungans all but disintegrated at the touch of the twin blades Maul had hoped to reserve for the Jedi. Their billed heads flew in all directions. His slashes halved them down the middle or through the midsection, and they squawked as they died. Their nostrils flared and their eyes bulged from their heads, and the white sand beach grew puddled with their blood. Maul maneuvered closer to Ganne, cutting the legs out from under the Gungans' mounts or impaling them on his lightsaber.

He launched himself into the air when he was still five meters from the Boss and the general. The latter lost his head to one of the blades, and Ganne was knocked from his mount by Maul's extended left hand. Agile despite his girth, the Gungan Boss clambered to his feet and scrambled for his electropole, but Maul was on him before he could use the weapon, disarming him and hauling him by his long ears through the chaos of the melee, into the tree line that defined the edge of the battlefield.

The Gungan's hooded eyes rolled around in his head, and spittle drooled from his thick lips. Maul brought the lightsaber close to Ganne's face, but then deactivated it. This weak-willed primitive didn't need to be threatened, he told himself. He simply needed to be manipulated into revealing the truth.

"The route to Otoh Gunga," Maul said, motioning meaningfully with his gloved hand.

Responding to the Force suggestion, Ganne's eyes grew even blanker. "Yousa needen to be knowen desa ways to Otoh Gunga," he said in the Gungan's pidgin tongue.

“Tell me,” Maul said.

“Mesa tell yousa. Yousa take yous mackineeks through da Rellias Straits.”

Maul yanked Ganne’s ears behind his head. “You’ll open the gates when we arrive.”

“Mesa open dissa gates when wesa riven.”

Satisfaction and loathing mixed in Maul’s malicious grin. Hauling Ganne to his three-toed feet, he began dragging him toward Trade Federation lines.

Information provided by the obedient but confused Gungan Boss allowed the Trade Federation S-DST to maneuver safely through the treacherous Rellias Straits and into the much larger Lake Paonga. No sooner did it arrive than parties of Gungan warriors began to appear on the shores to bombard the hovercraft with plasma boomers. Maul put a quick end to the attacks by securing Boss Ganne to the craft’s curved bow. The sight of Ganne made to serve as a figurehead gave the warriors pause, and for the remainder of the journey to Otoh Gunga, the Gungans did little more than brandish their electropoles and give voice to war cries.

With the STAPs annihilated, OOM-9 commanded the battle droids to sow the lake with depth charges, some of which touched off underwater explosions that transformed the formerly placid lake into an expanse of frothing turmoil. But no Gungan bodies were observed among the objects the explosions brought to the surface. Even before OOM-9’s drone submersibles returned from their scouting missions, Maul realized that word of the invasion and fall of Rellias had spread quickly to Otoh Gunga, and the city had been evacuated. Gazing north over the chaotic waters, he asked himself where Boss Rugor Nass could be hiding. Then he stormed to the bow of the hovercraft to haul a sodden Boss Ganne onto the forward deck.

Motioning again with one hand, Maul interrogated him. This time, however, consternation warped the features of the Gungan’s broad face. Even if Ganne wanted to divulge the answers, something inside him was battling the compulsion to betray the Gungans’ most deeply held secret.

Maul snorted. *Maybe not so primitive, after all.*

And from his cummerbund he drew the lightsaber and thumbed it to life.

Ganne’s disclosures came slowly and painfully, but not without honor.

OOM-9 waited until Maul had rolled the Gungan’s blistered body into the water to say: “Commander, Viceroy Gunray wishes you to be informed that a holotransmission has been received from Coruscant.

Queen Amidala and the Jedi are on their way to Naboo.”

Maul raced back to Theed, riding low and cutting a livid swath through the grasslands. Gunray and Haako had secreted themselves in the Palace throne room, but the security droids snapped to attention on seeing Maul and allowed him to enter. Instead of being grateful to Darth Sidious for having persuaded Queen Amidala to return to Naboo, the Neimoidians were rueful—sorrier than ever to have been drawn into a conspiracy with a Sith Lord. Maul knew that they would change their tune once the Queen ceded control of Naboo to the Trade Federation, but they lacked vision. Maul had to chase them from the throne room and out into Theed’s deserted central plaza, where he began to advise them on how to prepare for Amidala’s homecoming.

“You can start by stationing more droids around the Palace,” he said, “and ordering the patrols to sweep the area every five minutes instead of every fifteen.”

Haako tried to argue that Theed would be better protected if the patrols were widely dispersed, but Maul refused to sanction it. “You may *think* you have everyone rounded up in the camps, but you’re wrong. Some of Amidala’s security forces surrendered without resistance, but the rest are at large”—Maul gestured broadly—“hiding in the countryside, waiting for a signal that will recall them to Theed.”

“A signal?” Gunray said. “That’s not possible.”

Maul suppressed an urge to wring the viceroy’s neck. “What’s impossible is your luck in occupying this planet despite your bungling. Do you expect Amidala to simply sit down with you two and work out the terms of her surrender?”

“Isn’t that why she is returning?” Gunray said.

Maul’s hands clenched in fists of rage. “She’s returning to run you out of the Palace and send your ships scampering toward Neimoidia!”

Gunray stiffened in panic. “Sweep the plaza every five minutes!” he instructed one of the officer droids.

“Maintain constant surveillance,” Maul said, “using all spectrums. And increase security at all the detention camps.”

Gunray had just repeated the commands when his comlink chimed.

Maul nodded for him to acknowledge the transmission.

OOM-9’s metallic monotone issued from the comlink’s small speaker. “*Viceroy, the Droid Control Ship tracked the course of Queen Amidala’s starship. Only moments ago one of our patrols found it in the swamps.*”

Delight shone in Gunray’s eyes. “Have you arrested her?”

“*Negative, Viceroy. Like the Gungan city of Otoh Gunga, the starship was abandoned.*”

A faint shriek escaped Gunray.

Maul regarded him with loathing. “The Queen and the Jedi have returned. And somewhere in the swamps, I suspect that the Gungans are gathering their Grand Army.” He smiled wickedly. “You may yet have an actual war on your hands, Viceroy. You had better be prepared to fight every bit as hard as the natives will.”

“Find the Queen!” Gunray barked into the comlink. “Make it your top priority to arrest her!”

At the end of his rope, Maul snatched the comlink from Gunray’s trembling grasp and deactivated it. “Enough of your bumbling. I need to inform Lord Sidious of our situation.”

In the hangar where the Sith Infiltrator was docked, Maul used his wrist link to re-task the probe droids. Less than a day had passed since he had been in Theed, but in that short time the situation had been upended.

Darth Sidious had been informed that the Queen’s starship had been found abandoned in the vast Lianorm Swamp. Gunray had tried to assure Sidious that Amidala and the Jedi would soon be located, but Sidious knew better. The fact that Amidala had unexpectedly set the ship down in the swamps had provided Sidious a clue as to her motives. The Sith Lord had instructed Maul to be mindful, and to let the Jedi make the first move.

Soon after, OOM-9 confirmed Sidious’s suspicions that Amidala and the Gungans were assembling an army.

In a subsequent holotransmission, Sidious had made it plain to Maul that the Jedi, bound by their oaths to the Order, could not take sides. The most they could do was protect the Queen.

With the Neimoidians present during the follow-up communication, Maul had had to read between the lines of what his Master was saying. When Sidious said that the Queen’s foolish actions had surprised him, Maul understood that he was exaggerating. His Master wouldn’t have persuaded or *allowed* Amidala to return to Naboo unless he had known in advance that she would attempt to enlist the Gungans in her cause to win back the planet. Obviously, Darth Sidious favored the idea of a grand battle. Open rebellion would justify the actions of the Trade Federation in fighting back. More important, Sidious had granted Gunray permission to kill the Queen and as many Gungans as he deemed necessary to secure victory. The pretense of a peace treaty was no longer necessary.

Sidious had dismissed Maul’s concern that the Jedi might be using the Queen for their own purposes, but Maul wasn’t yet convinced that wasn’t the case. If the Jedi weren’t permitted to fight alongside Amidala, why had they returned? If their purpose was to draw Maul out, then someone had to have apprised them that Maul was on

Naboo, and the only being who could have done that was Darth Sidious.

Sidious was as eager to encourage a battle between the Trade Federation and the Gungans as he was an ultimate contest between Maul and the Jedi. He wanted to be assured that his apprentice had what it took to be a *true* Sith.

Maul programmed a series of coordinates into the probe droids and let them fly. Then he climbed aboard the speeder bike to follow them.

There was only one site where Amidala, the Jedi, and the Gungans could be plotting their counteroffensive.

The so-called Sacred Place at the northern end of Paonga Strait, in the swampy basins of the Gallo Mountains.

Not since whatever elder race had built and once occupied the Sacred Place had it played host to as many sentients and droids. Not merely the Gungans from Otoh Gunga and other bubble cities, and Amidala, her retinue, and the Jedi, but also OOM-9's squadrons of STAPs, searching in all the wrong places, and the droid commander's long-range reconnaissance platoons of battle droids, many of which had become mired in the soft ground. For a change, Maul found something to appreciate in the incompetence of the Neimoidians' army, for it served his purpose.

He sat crouched in a shallow waterway a couple of kilometers south of where the Gungans and the rest had gathered, his presence in the Force deliberately diminished and his wrist link pressed close to his ear, tuned to the frequency used by the probe droids he had sent ahead as listening devices. Filtered by the forest's leafy canopy, the ambient light was almost aquatic. Around him in all directions rose the ruins of grand stone buildings fronted with hieroglyphic stairways, raised agricultural fields, columned temples, and carved statuary—all of it being slowly disassembled by the roots of massive trees whose seeds had sprouted in the grooves between building blocks and in crevices in the flat stones that paved the plazas.

Since the start of his eavesdropping, Amidala and Boss Rugor Nass had cemented their alliance. Responding to a covert signal, several dozen members of the underground had streamed into the ruins, and the Queen's chief security officer, Panaka, had returned from a scouting mission in Theed. Maul wasn't surprised that Panaka had been able to infiltrate the city despite increased security—anyone schooled in military tactics could have done so simply by spending a few moments observing the routines of the battle droids, and then working around them. Maul hadn't bothered pointing out the weaknesses to Gunray, because he now wanted the Neimoidians to fail, despite his Master's plan.

But the Gungan force was not without its weaknesses.

Amidala's plan called for the use of the Grand Army as a diversion to draw battle droids from Theed to engage the Gungans on the grassy plains. At the same time, she and her elite team would penetrate the Theed Palace and capture Gunray. The Queen was correct in assuming that the droid army would collapse without sentient leadership, but she was mistaken in her belief that Gunray would have to shunt battle droids from Theed. Clearly she had no real awareness of the size of the Neimoidian army. Amidala's only shot at victory rested with the pilots of the Naboo Space Fighter Corps, who would have to take the fight to the Droid Control Ship in stationary orbit above the planet.

But Maul was left to wonder how Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi figured into Amidala's plan, since they were supposedly not allowed to intervene in the battle. Certainly they would accompany Amidala into Theed, but would they remain by her side while she attempted to slip into the Palace?

Maul wondered, too, to what degree his Master would want him to intercede. Was he obliged to notify Gunray of Amidala's plans? Should he attempt to lure the Gungans into a slaughter in Theed? There was still time to sabotage the berthed N-1 starfighters he had found in Theed's main hangar ...

This will work to our advantage, Darth Sidious had said on learning of the Queen's plot to ally with the Gungans.

Did Sidious mean to his and Maul's advantage, or to Sidious and *Hego Damask's* advantage? If Sidious and the Muun had designs on Naboo, then the greater the carnage the greater the sympathy for Senator Palpatine in the coming election. Whatever the reasons, Maul's task remained as before: to kill two Jedi. The rest of it—the blockade, the invasion, the counteroffensive—was nothing more than theater. So what if the Trade Federation lost its army and ten thousand Gungans died? Who cared, after all, about Naboo or its young Queen?

The real war was, as ever, between the Sith and the Jedi.

The deaths of Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan would send a message to the Jedi Council that the Sith had returned and the days of the Order were numbered.

Maul decided that if he never saw Naboo's grasslands again it would be too soon. But the long ride back to Theed—made all the more circuitous because of Gungans perched in the treetops with macrobinoculars—gave him time to formulate a plan of his own.

He took the speeder bike directly to the hangar, where close to four hundred B1 droids were patrolling the area. That was far too many to be easily defeated by Amidala and her handful of security officers and

pilots. With help from the Jedi it was possible that the Naboo could eventually overcome the battle droids, but Maul wanted to ensure that Amidala's small force would be able to move on to the Palace without encountering too much resistance. More important, he didn't want Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan worrying too much about her safety.

In the small plaza that fronted the hangar he searched out the droid in charge of security.

"What are your orders, Commander?" the droid said.

"Redeploy your troopers," Maul told it. "Leave sixty droids to defend the hangar and send the rest to reinforce the platoons safeguarding the Palace."

The droid took a moment to process the change in orders, though it was the control ship computer that asked: "Will that not leave the space force hangar vulnerable to attack, Commander?"

"I will personally make up for the reduced count."

That seemed to satisfy the commander, and it lifted its arm in salute. "Copy, copy."

Instantly, and without a word, droids began to gather in the plaza, where they fell into formation and marched off in the direction of the Palace. Maul watched them go, then hurried into the cavernous building. There he spent a short time imagining Amidala's arrival, the ensuing firefight, the starfighter pilots racing for their astromech-outfitted ships and launching out over the escarpment, the Queen and Panaka setting out for the Palace ...

Maul's gaze swept the hangar's broad entrance. A tunnel linked the hangar to the Palace, but Amidala would certainly assume that it had been booby-trapped, and would likely lead the Jedi and her infiltration team across the eastern fork of the Solleu River and through the narrow paths and across the skybridges of the Vis district. But a lightsaber duel fought along that route or in the woods that surrounded the Palace would be difficult to control. Somehow he had to waylay the Jedi before they exited the building. Again he scanned the dim interior, and his gaze fell on the tall blast doors that separated the hanger from the contiguous power generator building. On his earlier visit to the hangar he had done little more than peer into the plasma power station, but now, eager to know what lay beyond the blast doors, he hurried through them.

A short walk took him to the edge of a curved inspection platform flanked by circular engineering consoles. A catwalk extended from the platform across a deep and wide circular extraction shaft studded with towering acceleration columns, within which plasma energy was intensified before refinement and storage. The flashing columns were linked at various levels by service catwalks no wider than the central walkway, which terminated at a narrow door on the far side of the

shaft. Maul paced halfway to the door, then returned to the inspection platform and paced it a second time, marking the length and calculating the distances between it and the catwalks above and below. Several times he leapt to higher or lower catwalks. Once he had committed the arrangement to both mental and muscle memory, he walked all the way to the far door and through it.

The door opened on a soaring security hallway, interrupted at regular intervals by laser gates that sealed themselves in response to power outputs of the plasma activation process. Initially the firings seemed to occur randomly, but after he passed through the gates several times in both directions—cautiously at first, then as quickly as he could—Maul began to discern a subtle pattern. The pattern was by no means foolproof, and twice he came close to being fried by the firings, but in the end he had learned enough about the timing of the gates to provide himself with a slight advantage.

Beyond the final gate, the walkway broadened to encircle a narrow-mouthed plasma slough core of indeterminable depth. In an upper-tier maintenance station he found a hydrosponder and dropped it into the core.

If indeed the heavy tool hit bottom, the noise never reached him.

Maul paced the circular rim of the core, gazing down into the blackness; then he turned from the view to imagine and *direct* how the lightsaber duel would unfold. He would use the laser gates to separate the Jedi. He looked around. Yes: he would kill one of them just there. As for the other ...

Well, he'd allow himself a surprise or two.

Confident that his actions would please his Master, he raced to the Palace to await word that Queen Amidala and the Jedi had entered the city.

A short time later, in the depths of the power generator, Maul had savored the pained surprise in Qui-Gon's blue-gray eyes as the crimson blade ran him through. Now he paced the rim of the slough core, dragging the blade of his sundered lightsaber along the impervious metal. A dark side anointment, sparks showered down on Obi-Wan Kenobi, who dangled two meters below, with both hands clenched around a nozzle that projected from the core's inner wall.

Sweat dripped from Maul's fearsome face, and hatred radiated from his yellow eyes. He snarled at the young Jedi with the long Padawan braid, but Obi-Wan wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking at him, or acknowledging his death at the hands of a superior opponent.

In the split second it took Maul to realize that Obi-Wan was actually gazing at Qui-Gon's lightsaber—where it had come to a rest on the inspection platform—and that Maul had sabotaged himself by drawing

out his moment of victory, Obi-Wan leapt straight out of the core and somersaulted in midair, so that he was facing Maul when he landed behind him, with Qui-Gon's Force-summoned weapon in his hand.

As the green blade went through him, bisecting him at the hips, Maul had a fleeting memory of his life on Orsis, and of performing the same feat Obi-Wan just had, the first time he had used the Force among beings others than his Master.

The power of the dark side had played a cruel trick on him. And that it had, said it all.

Sidious is rid of another problem, for I am not yet a true Sith.

Cut in two and falling, Maul thought: *If I had it to do over again, I would keep that fact foremost in mind.*

But he was determined to be more lenient with himself than Darth Sidious would be. He would survive his defeat, and grant himself yet another second chance.

STAR WARS—The Expanded Universe

You saw the movies. You watched the cartoon series, or maybe played some of the video games. But did you know ...

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Princess Leia Organa said to Han Solo, “I love you.” Han said, “I know.” But did you know that they actually got married? And had three Jedi children: the twins, Jacen and Jaina, and a younger son, Anakin?

Luke Skywalker was trained as a Jedi by Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda. But did you know that, years later, he went on to revive the Jedi Order and its commitment to defending the galaxy from evil and injustice?

Obi-Wan said to Luke, “For over a thousand generations, the Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic. Before the dark times. Before the Empire.” Did you know that over those millennia, legendary Jedi and infamous Sith Lords were adding their names to the annals of Republic history?

Yoda explained that the dreaded Sith tend to come in twos: “Always two, there are. No more, no less. A Master, and an apprentice.” But did you know that the Sith didn’t always exist in pairs? That at one time in the ancient Republic there were as many Sith as Jedi, until a Sith Lord named Darth Bane was the lone survivor of a great Sith war and created the “Rule of Two”?

All this and much, much more is brought to life in the many novels and comics of the *Star Wars* expanded universe. You’ve seen the movies and watched the cartoon. Now venture out into the wider worlds of *Star Wars*!

Turn the page or jump to the [timeline](#) of *Star Wars* novels to learn more.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

STAR WARS

ROGUE PLANET

GREG BEAR

Author of Darwin's Radio



Anakin Skywalker stood in a long, single-file line in an abandoned

maintenance tunnel leading to the Wicko district garbage pit. With an impatient sigh, he hoisted his flimsy and tightly folded race wings by their leather harness and propped the broad rudder on the strap of his flight sandal. Then he leaned the wings against the wall of the tunnel and, tongue between his lips, applied the small glowing blade of a pocket welder, like a tiny lightsaber, to a crack in the left lateral brace. Repairs finished, he wagged the rotator experimentally. Smooth, though old.

Just the week before, he had bought the wings from a former champion with a broken back. Anakin had worked his wonders in record time, so he could fly now in the very competition where the champion had ended his career.

Anakin enjoyed the wrenching twist and bone-popping jerk of the race wings in flight. He savored the speed and the extreme difficulty as some savor the beauty of the night sky, difficult enough to see on Coruscant, with its eternal planet-spanning city-glow. He craved the competition and even felt a thrill at the nervous stink of the contestants, scum and riffraff all.

But above all, he loved *winning*.

The garbage pit race was illegal, of course. The authorities on Coruscant tried to maintain the image of a staid and respectable metropolitan planet, capital of the Republic, center of law and civilization for tens of thousands of stellar systems. The truth was far otherwise, if one knew where to look, and Anakin instinctively knew where to look.

He had, after all, been born and raised on Tatooine.

Though he loved the Jedi training, stuffing himself into such tight philosophical garments was not easy. Anakin had suspected from the very beginning that on a world where a thousand species and races met to palaver, there would be places of great fun.

The tunnel master in charge of the race was a Naplousean, little more than a tangle of stringlike tissues with three legs and a knotted nubbin of glittering wet eyes. "First flight is away," it hissed as it walked in quick, graceful twirls down the narrow, smooth-walled tunnel. The Naplousean spoke Basic, except when it was angry, and then it simply smelled bad. "Wings! Up!" it ordered.

Anakin hefted his wings over one shoulder with a professionally timed series of grunts, one-two-three, slipped his arms through the straps, and cinched the harness he had cut down to fit the frame of a twelve-year-old human boy.

The Naplousean examined each of the contestants with many critical eyes. When it came to Anakin, it slipped a thin, dry ribbon of tissue between his ribs and the straps and tugged with a strength that nearly pulled the boy over.

"Who you?" the tunnel master coughed.

"Anakin Skywalker," the boy said. He never lied, and he never worried about being punished.

"You way bold," the tunnel master observed. "What mother and father say, we bring back dead boy?"

"They'll raise another," Anakin answered, hoping to sound tough and capable, but not really caring what opinion the tunnel master held so long as it let him race.

"I know racers," the Naplousean said, its knot of eyes fighting each other for a better view. "You no racer!"

Anakin kept a respectful silence and focused on the circle of murky blue light ahead, growing larger as the line shortened.

"Ha!" the Naplousean barked, though it was impossible for its kind to actually laugh. It twirled back down the line, poking, tugging, and issuing more pronouncements of doom, all the while followed by an adoring little swarm of cam droids.

A small, tight voice spoke behind Anakin. "You've raced here before."

Anakin had been aware of the Blood Carver in line behind him for some time. There were only a few hundred on all of Coruscant, and they had joined the Republic less than a century before. They were an impressive-looking people: slender, graceful, with long three-jointed limbs, small heads mounted on a high, thick neck, and iridescent gold skin.

"Twice," Anakin said. "And you?"

"Twice," the Blood Carver said amiably, then blinked and looked up. Across the Blood Carver's narrow face, his nose spread into two fleshy flaps like a split shield, half hiding his wide, lipless mouth. The ornately tattooed nose flaps functioned both as a sensor of smell and a very sensitive ear, supplemented by two small pits behind his small, onyx-black eyes. "The tunnel master is correct. You are too young." He spoke perfect Basic, as if he had been brought up in the best schools on Coruscant.

Anakin smiled and tried to shrug. The weight of the race wings made this gesture moot.

"You will probably die down there," the Blood Carver added, eyes aloof.

"Thanks for the support," Anakin said, his face coloring. He did not mind a professional opinion, such as that registered by the tunnel master, but he hated being ragged, and he especially hated an opponent trying to psych him out.

Fear, hatred, anger ... The old trio Anakin fought every day of his life, though he revealed his deepest emotions to only one man: Obi-Wan Kenobi, his master in the Jedi Temple.

The Blood Carver stooped slightly on his three-jointed legs. "You smell like a *slave*," he said softly, for Anakin's ears alone.

It was all Anakin could do to keep from throwing off his wings and going for the Blood Carver's long throat. He swallowed his emotions down into a private cold place and stored them with the other dark things left over from Tatooine. The Blood Carver was on target with his insult, which stiffened Anakin's anger and made it harder to control himself. Both he and his mother, Shmi, had been slaves to the supercilious junk dealer, Watto. When the Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn had won him from Watto, they had had to leave Shmi behind ... something Anakin thought about every day of his life.

"You four next!" the tunnel master hissed, breezing by with its midsection whirled out like ribbons on a child's spinner.

Mace Windu strode down a narrow side hall in the main dormitory of the Jedi Temple, lost in thought, his arms tucked into his long sleeves, and was nearly bowled over by a trim young Jedi who dashed from a doorway. Mace stepped aside

deftly, just in time, but stuck out an elbow and deliberately clipped the younger Jedi, who spun about.

"Pardon me, Master," Obi-Wan Kenobi apologized, bowing quickly. "Clumsy of me."

"No harm," Mace Windu said. "Though you should have known I was here."

"Yes. The elbow. A correction. I'm appreciative." Obi-Wan was, in fact, embarrassed, but there was no time to explain things.

"In a hurry?"

"A great hurry," Obi-Wan said.

"The chosen one is not in his quarters?" Mace's tone carried both respect and irony, a combination at which he was particularly adept.

"I know where he's gone, Master Windu. I found his tools, his workbench."

"Not just building droids we don't need?"

"No, Master," Obi-Wan said.

"About the boy—" Mace Windu began.

"Master, when there is time."

"Of course," Mace said. "Find him. Then we shall speak ... and I want him there to listen."

"Of course, Master!" Obi-Wan did not disguise his haste. Few could hide concern or intent from Mace Windu.

Mace smiled. "He will bring you wisdom!" he called out as Obi-Wan ran down the hall toward the turbolift and the Temple's sky transport exit.

Obi-Wan was not in the least irritated by the jibe. He quite agreed. Wisdom, or insanity. It was ridiculous for a Jedi to always be chasing after a troublesome Padawan. But Anakin was no ordinary Padawan. He had been bequeathed to Obi-Wan by Obi-Wan's own beloved Master, Qui-Gon Jinn.

Yoda had put the situation to Obi-Wan with some style a few months back, as they squatted over a glowing charcoal fire and cooked shoo bread and wurr in his small, low-ceilinged quarters. Yoda had been about to leave Coruscant on business that did not concern Obi-Wan. He had ended a long, contemplative silence by saying, "A very interesting problem you face, and so we all face, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Obi-Wan, ever the polite one, had tilted his head as if he were not acquainted with any particular problem.

"The chosen one Qui-Gon gave to us all, not proven, full of fear, and *yours to save*. And if you do not save him ..."

Yoda had said nothing more to Obi-Wan about Anakin thereafter. His words echoed in Obi-Wan's thoughts as he took an express taxi to the outskirts of the Senate District. Travel time—mere minutes, with wrenching twists and turns through hundreds of slower, cheaper lanes and levels of traffic.

Obi-Wan was concerned it would not be nearly fast enough.

The pit spread before Anakin as he stepped out on the apron below the tunnel. The three other contestants in this flight jostled for a view. The Blood Carver was particularly rough with Anakin, who had hoped to save all his energy for the flight.

What's eating him? the boy wondered.

The pit was two kilometers wide and three deep from the top of the last accelerator shield to the dark bottom. This old maintenance tunnel overlooked the second accelerator shield. Squinting up, Anakin saw the bottom of the first shield, a huge concave roof cut through with an orderly pattern of hundreds of holes, like an overturned colander in Shmi's kitchen on Tatooine. Each hole in this colander, however, was ten meters wide. Hundreds of shafts of sunlight dropped from the ports to pierce the gloom, acting like sundials to tell the time in the open world, high above the tunnel. It was well past meridian.

There were over five thousand such garbage pits on Coruscant. The city-planet produced a trillion tons of garbage every hour. Waste that was too dangerous to recycle—fusion shields, worn-out hyperdrive cores, and a thousand other by-products of a rich and highly advanced world—was delivered to the district pit. Here, the waste was sealed into canisters, and the canisters were conveyed along magnetic rails to a huge circular gun carriage below the lowest shield. Every five seconds, a volley of canisters was propelled from the gun by chemical charges. The shields then guided the trajectory of the canisters through their holes, gave them an extra tractor-field boost, and sent them into tightly controlled orbits around Coruscant.

Hour after hour, garbage ships in orbit collected the canisters and transported them to outlying moons for storage. Some of the most dangerous loads were actually shot off into the large, dim yellow sun, where they would vanish like dust motes cast into a volcano.

It was a precise and necessary operation, carried out like clockwork day after day, year after year.

Perhaps a century before, someone had thought of turning the pits into an illegal sport center, where aspiring young toughs from Coruscant's rougher neighborhoods, deep below the glittering upper city, could prove their mettle. The sport had become surprisingly popular in the pirate entertainment channels that fed into elite apartments, high in the star-scrubbing towers that rose everywhere on the capital world. Enough money was generated that some pit officials could be persuaded to turn a blind eye, so long as the contestants were the only ones at risk.

A garbage canister, hurled through the accelerator shields, could easily swat a dozen racers aside without damage to itself. The last shield would supply it with the corrective boost necessary to compensate for a few small lives.

Anakin watched the flickering jump light on the tunnel ceiling with focused concentration, lips tight, eyes wide, a little dew of sweat on his cheeks. The tunnel was hot. He could hear the roar of canisters, see their silver specks shoot through the shield ports to the next higher level, leaving behind blue streaks of ionized air.

The pit atmosphere smelled like a bad shop generator, thick with ozone and the burnt-rubber odor of gun discharge.

The tunnel master twirled up to the exit to encourage the next team.

"Glory and destiny!" the Naplousean enthused, and slapped Anakin across the brace between his wings. Anakin stayed focused, trying to sense where the currents would be at this level, where the little vortices of lift and plunge would accumulate as they formed and rotated between the shields. Ozone would always be in highest concentration in the areas where the winds would be strongest and most dangerous. And for every volley of canisters, following a prearranged formation through the shields, another volley would soon follow, taking a precisely determined series of alternate routes.

Easy. Like flying between a storm of steel raindrops.

Anakin's fellow racers took their places in the tunnel's exit, jockeying for the best position on the apron. The Blood Carver gave Anakin a jab with his jet-tipped right wing. Anakin pushed it aside and kept his focus.

The Naplousean tunnel master lifted its ribbon-limb, the tip curling and uncurling in anticipation.

The Blood Carver stood to Anakin's left and closed his eyes to slits. His nostril flaps pulsed and flared, filled with tiny sensory cavities, sweeping the air for clues.

The Naplousean made a thick whickering noise—its way of cursing—and ordered the contestants to hold. A flying maintenance droid was making a sweep of this level. From where they waited, the droid appeared as a flyspeck, a tiny dot buzzing its way around the wide gray circumference of the pit, issuing little musical tones

between the roar and swoosh of canisters.

Managers could be bribed, but droids could not. They would have to wait until this one dropped to the level below.

Another volley of canisters shot through the shields with an ear-stunning bellow. Blue ion trails curled like phantom serpents between the concave lower shield and the convex upper shield.

“Longer for you to live,” the Blood Carver whispered to Anakin. “Little human boy who smells like a slave.”

Obi-Wan, against all his personal inclinations, had made it his duty to know the ins and outs of anything having to do with illegal racing, anywhere within a hundred kilometers of the Jedi Temple. Anakin Skywalker, his charge, his responsibility, was one of the best Padawans in the Temple—easily fulfilling the promise sensed by Qui-Gon Jinn—but as if to compensate for this promise, to bring a kind of balance to the boy’s lopsided brace of abilities, Anakin had an equal brace of faults.

His quest for speed and victory was easily the most aggravating and dangerous. Qui-Gon Jinn had perhaps encouraged this in the boy by allowing him to race for his own freedom, three years before, on Tatooine.

But Qui-Gon could not justify his actions now.

How Obi-Wan missed the unpredictable liveliness of his Master! Qui-Gon had spurred him to great effort by what appeared at first to be whimsical japes and always turned out to be profound readings of their situation.

Under Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan had become one of the most capable and steady-tempered Jedi Knights in the Temple. Obi-Wan, for all his talents, had been not just a little like Anakin as a boy: rough-edged and prone to anger. Obi-Wan had soon come to find the quiet center of his place in the Force. He now preferred an orderly existence. He hated conflict within his personal relations. In time, he had become the stable center and Qui-Gon had become the unpredictable goad. How often it had struck him that this topsy-turvy relationship with Qui-Gon had once more been neatly reversed—with Anakin!

There were always two, Master and Padawan. And it was sometimes said in the Temple that the best pairs were those who complemented each other.

He had once vowed, after a particularly trying moment, that he would reward himself with a year of isolation on a desert planet, far from Coruscant and any Padawans he might be assigned, once he was free of Anakin. But this did not stop him from carrying out his duties to the boy with an exacting passion.

There were two garbage pits inside Anakin’s radius of potential mischief, and one was infamous for its competition pit dives. Obi-Wan searched for guidance from the Force. It was never too difficult to sense Anakin’s presence. He chose the nearest pit and climbed a set of maintenance stairs to the upper citizen-observation walkway at the top.

Obi-Wan ran along the balustrade, empty at this hour of the day—the middle of the afternoon bureaucrat work period. He paid little attention to the roaring whine of the canisters as they soared through the air into space. Sonic booms rang out every few seconds, quite loud on the balustrade, but damped by sloping barriers before they reached the outlying buildings. He was looking for the right turbolift to take him to the lower levels, to the abandoned feed chambers and maintenance tunnels where the races would be staged.

Air traffic was forbidden over the pit. The lanes of craft that constantly hummed over Coruscant like many layers of fishnet were diverted around the launch corridor, leaving an obvious pathway to the upper atmosphere, and to space above that. But within this vacant cylinder of air, occupied only by swiftly rising canisters of toxic

garbage, Anakin-Wan's keen eyes spotted a hovering observation droid.

Not a city droid, but a 'caster model, not more than ten or twenty centimeters in diameter, of the kind used by entertainment crews. The droid was flying in high circles around the perimeter, vigilant for enforcement droids or officers. Obi-Wan looked for, and found, six more small droids, standing watch over the upper shield.

Three flew in formation above a cupola less than a hundred meters from where Obi-Wan stood.

These droids were guarding a likely exit point for the crews should metropolitan officials decide, for whatever reason, to ignore their bribes and shut down the races.

And no doubt they were marking the turbolift Obi-Wan would have to take to find Anakin.

The next dive had been postponed until the observers were certain that the pit watch droid had passed to the next lower level. The tunnel master was very upset by the delay. The air was thick with its nauseating odor.

Anakin drew on his Padawan discipline and tried to ignore the stench and keep his focus on the space between the shields. They could dive at any moment, and he had to know the air currents and sense the pattern of the canisters, still flying through the accelerator ports in endless procession, up and out into space.

The Blood Carver was not helping. His irritation at the delay was apparently being channeled into ragging the human boy at his side, and Anakin was soon going to have to put up some sort of defense to show he was not just a stage prop.

"I hate the smell of a slave," the Blood Carver said.

"I wish you'd stop saying that," Anakin said. The closest thing he had to a weapon was his small welder, pitiful under the circumstances. The Blood Carver outmassed him by many tens of kilos.

"I refuse to compete with a lower order of being, a *slave*. It brings disgrace upon my people, and upon *me*."

"What makes you think I'm a slave?" Anakin asked as mildly as he could manage and not appear even more vulnerable.

The Blood Carver's nose flaps drew together to make an impressive fleshy blade in front of his face. "You bought your wings from an injured Lemmer. I recognize them. Or someone bought them for you ... a tout, I would guess, slipping you into the race to make someone else look good."

"You, maybe?" Anakin said, and then regretted the flippancy.

The Blood Carver swung a folded wing around, and Anakin ducked just in time. The breeze lifted his hair. Even with the wings on his own back, he quickly assumed a defensive posture, as Obi-Wan had taught him, prepared for another move.

The bad smell abruptly grew more intense. Anakin sensed the Naplousean right behind him. "A duel before a race? Maybe a holocam is needed here, to amuse our loyal fans?"

The Blood Carver suddenly appeared entirely innocent, his nostril wings folded back, his expression one of faint surprise.

The long curved corridor circumnavigating the pit was filled with old machinery, rusting and filthy hulks stored centuries ago by long-dead pit maintenance crews: old launch sleds, empty canisters big enough to stand up in, and the tarnished plasteel tracks that had once guided them down to the loading tunnels.

It was in this jumble that Obi-Wan found a thriving trade in race paraphernalia.

"Flight starting soon!" cried a little lump of a boy even younger than Anakin. The boy had obviously come from offworld, born on a high-gravity planet, strong, stout, fearless, and almost unbelievably grimy. "Wagers here for the Greeter? Fifty-to-one max, go home rich!"

"I'm looking for a young human racer," Obi-Wan said, bending down before the boy. "Sandy brown hair cut short, slender, older than you."

"You bet on him?" the stout boy asked, face wrinkled in speculation. This child's life was guided by money and nothing more.

So much distortion, Obi-Wan thought. *Not even Qui-Gon could save all the children.*

"I'll wager, but first I want to have a look at him," Obi-Wan said. He waved his hand slightly, like a magician. "To observe his racing points."

The stout boy watched the hand, but no scarf appeared. He smirked. "Come to the Greeter," the boy said. "He'll tell you what you want to know. Hurry! The race starts in seconds!"

Obi-Wan was sure he could sense Anakin somewhere near, on this level. And he could also sense that the boy was preparing for something strenuous, but whether for a fight or the competition he could not tell.

"And where will I buy a set of race wings?" Obi-Wan asked, aware there was no time for niceties.

"You, a racer?" The stout boy broke into howls of laughter. "The Greeter! He sells wings, too!"

Something was wrong. Anakin should have been aware of any anomalies earlier, but he had been focused on preparing for the race, and what confronted him now was another matter entirely.

The Naplousean tunnel master had been alerted by an accomplice that the maintenance droid had dropped to the next level, and that had distracted it from Anakin. In that instant, the Blood Carver withdrew one arm from a wing and reached into his tunic.

That made no sense. Anakin suddenly realized the Blood Carver's primary mission was not to race.

He knows I was a slave. He knows who I am, and that means he knows where I am from.

The Blood Carver swung out a twister knife. His arm seemed to telescope, all the joints going straight at once, then doubling back into a neat U.

"*Padawan!*" he hissed, and the spinning tips of the three blades glittered like a pretty gem.

Anakin, hampered by the bulk of the wings, could not move fast enough to completely avoid the thrust. He bent sideways, and the knife missed his face, but one blade gouged his wrist and the other two blades jammed against the left main strut. Pain shot up Anakin's arm. Quick as a snake, the Blood Carver drew his arm back and aimed another thrust.

Anakin had no choice.

He kicked away from the tunnel, skidded down the sloping apron, and spread the race wings to their full width.

Without hesitating, the Blood Carver followed.

"Race not yet!" the tunnel master husked, and a dense plume of stink shot from the tunnel, leaving the other contestants gagging.

Obi-Wan had only seconds to grasp the main points of this new piece of equipment he had purchased. He hefted the wings onto one shoulder and ran down the long tunnel, the loose and rattling struts scraping the ceiling. He hoped this was the tunnel from which the racers were flying, but found himself at the end, standing alone on the apron, staring across the vast lens-shaped space of the pit between two acceleration shields.

His newly purchased wings did not fit. Fortunately they were larger, not smaller, and the Greeter had not cheated him too badly, selling him wings intended for a biped with two arms. He cinched the thorax straps as tight as the buckles would

allow, then ratcheted the arm clamps until the struts threatened to bend. Whether the wings were charged and fueled, he did not know until he swung up a little transparent optical cup and attached it over his eye.

The red and blue lines in his field of vision showed one-quarter charge in the small fuel tank. Hardly enough for a controlled fall.

Dying in a stupid garbage pit race, tangled in antique race wings, was not what Obi-Wan had hoped for as a Jedi.

He looked to his left, saw a blank space of wall, then turned right, grabbing a broken metal bar to lean out. The wings nearly pulled him out of balance, and he hung precariously for a moment. Recovering his footing, his race wings rattling ominously, Obi-Wan saw Anakin standing on the apron of the tunnel to his immediate right, about fifty meters away. He was just in time to witness the confused tangle of limbs and the flash of a weapon.

Obi-Wan leapt just as Anakin fell or jumped, and barely had time to observe a Blood Carver, Anakin's assailant, leap after.

His wings spread wide with almost no effort, and the tiny motors at their tips coughed and whined to life. Sensors on the struts searched for the intense tractor fields that permeated the space between the huge, curved shields. By themselves, the wings could not have supported a boy, much less a man, but by using the stray fields from the accelerator ports, a flyer could perform all sorts of aerobatics.

The first maneuver that Obi-Wan mastered, however, was to fall straight down.

Almost three hundred meters.

Anakin's confusion and pain quickly re-formed into a clarity he had not experienced in many years—three years, to be precise, since his final Podrace on Tatooine, when he had last been so close to death.

It took him almost three seconds to roll to a proper position, feet angled slightly down, wings folded by his side, head tilted back against the brace. Like diving into an immense pool. Then, slowly, the wings seemed to spread without his conscious volition. The motors coughed and sputtered to a sharp, well-tuned whine, like the skirling of two large insects. He felt the sensors twirling just beyond his fingertips, perceived the faint vibrating signal in the palms of both hands that a gradient field was available.

He had fallen less than a hundred meters. The wings, spread to their full width of five arm spans, quivered and shuddered like living things as they caught the air and the fields, and as the motors responded to subtle jerks of his arms, he gained complete control—and *soared!*

The optical cup that gave him fuel and other readings flopped uselessly below his chin, but he could get along without it.

Not bad, he thought, for someone so close to dying! The clarity became a rush of energy throughout his small frame. For an instant he forgot the race, the pain in his arm, the fear, and felt a thrill of complete victory over matter, over the awkward bundle of metal and fiber on his back, over the space between the huge curving shields.

And, of course, over the Blood Carver who had wanted to kill him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw what he thought might be the Blood Carver, twirling like a falling leaf below and to his left. He saw the figure scrape the wall of the pit and tumble, catch a gust and go right again.

But this hapless flier was not the Blood Carver. With another spin of sharp emotion, he realized his assailant had leapt from the apron after him and was now soaring on a parallel, about twenty meters to his right.

No doubt their status as contestants had been canceled by the tunnel master. *Very well*, Anakin thought. He never cared much for the formalities of victory. If this was

a contest solely between him and the murderous Blood Carver, so be it.

The prize would be survival.

No worse than Podracing against a Dug.

Obi-Wan did not fear dying, but he resented what this kind of death implied: a failure of technique, a lack of elegance, a certain foolhardy recklessness that he had always tried to eliminate from his character.

The first step to avoiding this unhappy result was relaxation. After the first glancing contact with the wall, he went completely limp and tuned all his senses to how the air, the tractor fields, and the wings interacted. As Qui-Gon had once advised him when training with a lightsaber, he let the equipment teach him.

But such a process could take hours, and he had only a few seconds before he smacked himself flat on the lower shield. Best to make do with what he had learned so far.

And follow the apprentice's example.

Obi-Wan looked right and saw Anakin assume his flight position. Obi-Wan spread the wings and let his feet drop below the level of his head. He knew enough about lift-wing racing to catch the vibrations in his palms, to understand what they implied, to grab the strongest gradient field available to him, and to soar out across the shield like a leveret pulling out of a stoop.

The sensation was exhilarating, but Obi-Wan ignored that and focused instead on the tiniest indications from the wings, from the excruciating bind of the straps around his chest where he hung in their loose embrace. He had gained just a little more time.

The buzz in his palms ceased. The sensors rotated noisily, and again he started to drop. The increased thrust of the wingtip engines at this point in the race was more for control than for lift, but with the wings spread to maximum—nearly pulling his arms from their sockets—the toes of his boots came within scant centimeters of grazing the shield.

Then the buzz in his palms became frantic. He saw a ten-meter-wide hole, passed over it, felt the tractor field strengthen near the next port, and swerved to one side just in time to avoid the ear-stunning bellow of a garbage canister.

The updraft and roil of air in the canister's wake pulled him up like a fly caught in a dust devil. Deafened by the noise, wings shuddering uncontrollably, his palms hot with the frantic buzz of the sensors, he wrapped the wings tightly to his sides to break loose from the strongest part of the field, fell for some distance, caught the field gradient at a usable intensity, and spread the wings once again. The result: at least an illusion of control.

Across the pit, another canister roared through a port in the lower shield and was shunted by the tractor fields to its next port. And another. A volley was under way.

Obi-Wan had no idea where Anakin was, or whether he was still alive. And until he gained more than just rudimentary control of the wings, with less reliance on luck, his Padawan's circumstance mattered little.

The goal of the garbage pit race was to fly across the convex surface of the lower shield, drop through a port not currently fully charged with an acceleration field or filled with a rising canister, and then do it all again for the next two shields below that, until one arrived at the bottom of the pit.

Once at the bottom, all a contestant had to do was grab a scale from a garbage worm, while still airborne, stuff the prize into a pouch, and then ascend through the shields and fly into another tunnel to present the scale to the judge—that is, to the Greeter, who controlled nearly all the action in these affairs.

Garbage not packaged for export into space was gathered from the pit's municipal

territory, mixed into a slurry of silicone oils, spewed from the lowest ring of outfall tunnels, and processed by the worms. The worms took this less-toxic garbage and chewed it down to tiny pellets, removing any last bits of organics, plastic, or recoverable metal.

Garbage worms were huge, unfriendly, and essential to the efficient operation of the pit. The garbage worms had natural ancestors on other worlds, but Coruscant technicians, masters of the vital arts, had long since bred these monsters away from the limits of their origins. Arrayed in the silicone slurry like jumbled nests of thick cable, the slowly writhing worms reduced millions of tons of preprocessed pellets to carbon dioxide, methane, and other organics that floated in thick islands of pale yellow froth on the roiled surface of the silicone lake. Discarded metals and minerals and glasses sank and were scraped from the bottom of the basin by ponderous submerged droids.

It was said a garbage worm could actually eat a defunct hyperdrive core and survive ... for a few seconds. But that was seldom expected of them.

There were a great many worms in the lake of silicone at the bottom of the pit. Their scales were large and loose, glittered like diamonds, and were prized by the Greeter, who sold them to a small but select market of collectors as sports memorabilia.

Anakin performed a roll and looked up. The Blood Carver was on his left now. The other contestants had leapt after them, so the race was on after all. The tunnel master must have decided that the disruption only added to the sport.

Anakin could think of no better plan than to win the race by staying far from the reach of the Blood Carver, present a worm scale to the Greeter, and return to the Temple before anyone noticed he was missing. He could be back in training with Obi-Wan inside of an hour, and he would sleep well tonight, with no bad dreams, exhausted and justified on a deep level not yet penetrated by Jedi discipline.

He would have to disguise his wrist wound, of course. It did not appear too bad, on cursory inspection, all he could manage in flight.

Time to pick his port, tuck, and drop like a stone once again—a stone in complete control.

Which is where Anakin always wanted to be.

* * *

Obi-Wan picked himself up from the broad curved surface of the shield and quickly, with Jedi expertise, assessed his physical condition. He was bruised, frustrated—he quickly damped that, for frustration could easily lead to self-defeating anger—but he had avoided breaking any bones. He was also winded, but he recovered even as he looked for the other racers.

Anakin circled in a slowly ascending spiral over the center of the shield and about a hundred meters above it. A second golden figure performed a quick, leaflike downward spiral about a hundred meters above Anakin. A third and fourth were ascribing broad arcs around the perimeter.

Obi-Wan focused on Anakin. He prepared his wings for another liftoff, just as he saw his Padawan tuck like a diver and drop out of sight through the shield's central hole.

Obi-Wan ran to the lip of the nearest port, about twenty meters distant. He made sure his wings were properly folded and could be easily swept out and expanded. His feet broke through gluey tractor fields on the shield's curved surface. The air sizzled around him. His insides felt as if he were marching through the worst thunderstorm on the most violent gas-giant planet.

Drifts of frozen moisture flurried around him in the wake of a canister as it

screamed through a port less than fifty meters to his right. The cyclonic updraft nearly lifted him from his feet, and he did not know if he could muster the strength to stand upright once more against the local field lines.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, like Qui-Gon Jinn, was no supporter of training by punishment. Recognition of mistakes by the apprentice was almost always sufficient. Still, with shame, he saw in a dark part of his thoughts that he was planning harsh words, extreme trials, and many, many extra chores for Anakin Skywalker, and not just to improve his Padawan's perspective on life.

Anakin felt a pure kind of joy as he spread his wings and caught a field on the next lower level. The beauty of the ion trails, the lightning that played continuously between plumes of discharge smoke and brightened the distant walls of the pit, the drumbeat roar every five seconds of ascending canisters was beautiful, but more important, they all, with one almost-living voice, called out a challenge greater than anything he had experienced on Tatooine, including the Boonta Eve Podrace.

This was a place most would find terrifying, where most beings would certainly die, yet he was only a boy, a *mere child*, a former slave, relying not on Jedi training so much as raw native courage. He was alone, happy to be alone! He would gladly live out the rest of his life in this kind of immediate peril if he could simply forget the past failures that haunted him at night, whenever he tried to sleep. The failures—and the terrifying sense of carrying something beyond his power to control.

The dark empty boots that trod the worst of his nightmares.

Again, he picked out his port, near the shield center, where few canisters were launched. He could feel the pulse of the huge gun carriage beneath this lowest shield. His senses were tuned to the rhythm of that rotating launcher, bigger than the entire Jedi Temple. Anakin listened for the hesitation, the brief silence followed by a bass grind and *chuff* before a ring of canisters was chambered and fired. Best, of course, to drop through a port during a lull between discharges, and away from a port where a canister had recently passed, with its flux of gases, up-drafts, lightning, and blue ion trails.

Before he made his decision, Anakin marveled at a phenomenon he had only heard about from other racers in tones of awe: rising circles of plasma spheres, drifting as if imbued with purpose in the void above the first shield. They glowed orange and greenish blue, and he could even hear their fierce sizzle. To touch them was to be instantly fried. He watched a circle of these spheres explode with tinny pops, and through the space where they had been, a particularly fierce bolt of lightning flew like a javelin through a hoop.

This raised his neck hair in a way no static discharge could explain. It was as if he faced the primitive gods of the garbage pit, the real masters of this place, yet to think this even for a moment went against all of his training. *The Force is everywhere and demands nothing, neither obeisance nor awe.*

But this, of course, was what he needed to experience in order to forget. He needed to strip down to pure savagery, to that place below his name, his memory, his self, where ominous shadows dwelled, and where one could turn in an instant from the light side of the Force to the dark and hardly know they were different.

Anakin, pure instinct, a mote of dust in the game, tucked his wings once more and dropped through the central port in the shield.

He did not notice, fifty meters above him, that the Blood Carver did the same.

The gun carriage sat on its elevated mount two hundred meters below the shield, going through its automated motions. From tracks on all sides it received loaded and charged canisters, each falling into a firing chamber with only a bulbous tip protruding. Each canister bore a specific designation in the carriage program, a specified route through the four shields, with four chances to be accelerated into a

specific orbit. The charge beneath the canister would carry it only the first three hundred meters, to the first shield. Thereafter the tractor fields and magnetic-pulse engines took over. It was a sophisticated yet centuries-old design, rugged, durable, duplicated all over Coruscant.

The air above the rotating carriage was almost un-breathable. Fumes from the exploding charges—simple chemical explosives—could not be vented and processed fast enough to prevent a toxic pall forming below the first shield. Added to this perpetual burnt-rubber haze were the miasmic vapors from the silicone-filled basin below the gun carriage.

It was here that the most primitive—not to mention the largest—creatures on Coruscant lived and performed their functions in a perpetual twilight, illuminated only by the fitful glows of work lights hung from the undersides of the gun carriage supports. The largest worms were hundreds of meters long and three or four meters wide.

Anakin glided to one side of the lowest level and alighted on a carriage support. He could feel through his feet the rotation and launching of the chambered canisters. The immense mass of the ferrocabon structure shuddered under his flight slippers.

He had conserved most of his fuel for this moment. The tractor fields below the carriage were weak, sufficient only to discourage the worms from rising to suck at the supports. Once he had plucked loose a glassy worm scale, he would have to jet upward to the first shield and catch a canister updraft, then be pulled through a port to the void above the first shield.

This would be insanely difficult.

All the better. Anakin, eyes wide open, surveyed the dim, chaotic brew of worms below. He locked one wing briefly, pulled loose an arm, and wrapped a breather mask over his mouth and nose. He then took this opportunity to attach his optical cup and pulled down bubble goggles to protect his eyes from the silicone spray. Then he tensed to leap.

But he had made a Jedi apprentice's first mistake—to direct all one's attention to a single goal or object. Focus was one thing, narrow perception another, and Anakin had ignored everything above him.

He felt a prickle in his senses and looked to one side just in time to catch, with the top of his head, a blow aimed at his temple. The Blood Carver glided past and landed on the next stanchion, watching with satisfaction as the young Jedi tumbled headlong toward the churning worm-mass.

Then the Blood Carver followed, long neck stretched forward, nostril flaps clapped together in a wedge, gliding down to finish his day's work.

Anakin's fall was cushioned by an island of the thick, smelly froth that floated across the lake of worms. He sank slowly into the froth, releasing more noxious gases, until a burst of ammonia jerked him to stunned consciousness. His eyes stung. The blow to his head had knocked his goggles and breather mask awry.

First things first. He spread his wings and unbuckled his harness, then rolled over to distribute his weight evenly along the wings. They acted like snowshoes on the froth, and his rate of sinking slowed. The wings were bent and useless now anyway, even if he could tug them from the foaming mass.

The Blood Carver had just murdered him. That death would take its own sweet time to arrive was no relief from its certainty. The broad island of pale yellow undulated with the rise and fall of worm bodies. A constant crackling noise came from all around: bubbles bursting in the froth. And he heard a more sinister sound, if that was possible: the slow, low hiss of the worms sliding over and under and around each other.

Anakin could barely see. *I'm a goner.* Reaching out to put himself in tune with the

Force might be soothing, but he had not yet reached the point in his training of being able to levitate, at least not more than a few centimeters.

In truth, Anakin Skywalker felt so mortified by his lack of attention, so ashamed by his actions in being here, in the pit, in the first place, that his death seemed secondary to much larger failures.

He was not made to be a Jedi, whatever Qui-Gon Jinn had thought of him. Yoda and Mace Windu had been correct all along.

But acid awareness of his stupidity did not require that he take further insults in stride. He felt the noiseless flight of the Blood Carver a few meters overhead and almost casually ducked in time to miss a second blow.

A Jedi does not contemplate revenge. But Anakin's brain was in full gear now, his thinking clarified by the ache in his skull and the dull throb in his arm. The Blood Carver knew who he was, where he was from—too much of a coincidence to be called a slave, this far from the lawless fringe systems where slavery was common. Someone was either stalking Anakin personally or Jedi in general.

Anakin doubted he had attracted much attention during his short life, or was worthy of an assassin's interest by himself. Far more likely that the Temple was being watched and that some group or other was hoping to take down the Jedi one by one, picking the weakest and most exposed first.

That would be me.

The Blood Carver was a threat to the people who had freed Anakin from slavery, who had taken him in and given him a new life away from Tatooine. If he was never to be a Jedi, or even live to maturity, he could remove at least one threat against that brave and necessary order.

He pulled up his breather mask, took a lungful of filtered air, and examined his foundering platform. A wing brace could be broken free and swung about as a weapon. He stooped carefully, balancing his weight, and grasped the slender brace. Strong in flight, the brace yielded to his off-center pressure, and he bent it back and forth until it snapped. At the opposite end, where the wings socketed in the rotator, he made another bend, stamping quickly with his booted foot, then jerked the end free and snatched away the flimsy lubricating sheath. The rotator ball made a fair club.

But the entire set of wings weighed less than five kilograms. The club, about a hundred grams. He would have to swing with all his might to give the impact meaning.

The Blood Carver swooped low again, his legs drawn back, triple-jointed arms hanging like the pedipalps on a clawswift on Naboo.

He was focused completely on the Padawan.

Making the same mistake as Anakin had.

With a heart-leap of hope and joy, Anakin saw Obi-Wan winging over the Blood Carver. The boy's master extended the beam on his lightsaber as he dropped with both feet on the assailant's wings and snapped them like straws.

Two swipes of the humming blade and the outer tips of the Blood Carver's wings fell away.

The Blood Carver gave a muffled cry and flipped on his back. The fuel in his wingtip tanks caught fire and spun him in a brilliant pinwheel, elevating him almost twenty meters before sputtering out.

He fell without a sound and slipped into the lake a dozen meters away, raising a small, gleaming plume of oily silicone. Ghosts of burning methane swirled briefly above him.

Obi-Wan recovered and raised his wings just in time to end up buried to his waist in the froth. The look on his face as he collapsed the lightsaber was pure Obi-Wan: patience and faint exasperation, as if Anakin had just failed a spelling test.

Anakin reached out to help his Master stay upright. "Keep your wings up, keep them high!" he shouted.

"Why?" Obi-Wan said. "I cannot *vault* the two of us out of this mess."

"I still have fuel!"

"And I have almost none. These are terrible devices, very difficult to control."

"We can combine our fuel!" Anakin said, his upper face and eyes bright in the murk.

The froth rippled alarmingly. At the edge of their insubstantial island of foam, a gleaming silver-gray tube as wide as four arm spans arched above the silicone slurry. Its skin was crusted with stuck-on bits of garbage, and its side was studded with a lateral line of small black eyes trimmed in brilliant blue.

The eyes poked out on small stalks and examined them curiously. The worm seemed to ponder whether they were worth eating.

Even now, Anakin observed the prize scales glittering along the worm's length. *The best I've ever seen—as big as my hand!*

Obi-Wan was sinking rapidly. He blinked at the haze of silicone mist and noxious gases wafting over them.

Anakin reached down with all the delicacy and balance he could muster and unhooked the fuel cylinders from his wings, taking care to disconnect the feed tubes to the outboard jets and pinch off their nozzles.

Obi-Wan concentrated on keeping himself from sinking any deeper into the sticky foam.

Another arch of worm segment, high and wide as a pedestrian walkway, thrust itself with a liquid squeal from the opposite side of the diminishing patch. More eyes looked them over. The arch quivered as if with anticipation.

"I'll never be this stupid again," Anakin said breathlessly as he attached the tanks to Obi-Wan's wings.

"Tell it to the Council," Obi-Wan said. "I have no doubt that's where we'll both be, if we manage to accomplish six impossible things in the next two minutes."

The two worm segments vibrated in unison and hissed through the silicone like tugged ropes, proving themselves to be one long creature as they rose high overhead. More coils surrounded them: other, bigger worms. Obviously, the Jedi—Master and apprentice—looked tasty, and now a competition was under way. The segments whipped back and forth, striking the edges of the island. The froth flew up in hissing puffs, until there was hardly more remaining than an unwieldy plug.

Anakin gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder with one hand. "Obi-Wan, you are the greatest of all the Jedi," he told him earnestly.

Obi-Wan glared at his Padawan.

"Could you give us just a little boost ...," Anakin pleaded. "You know, up and out?"

Obi-Wan did, and Anakin lit off their jets at the very same instant.

The jolt did not distract him from reaching out with outstretched fingers, grazing a curve of worm skin, and grabbing a scale. Somehow they lifted to the first shield and slipped into the updraft of a discharged canister. Spinning, knocked almost senseless, they were drawn up through a port.

Obi-Wan felt Anakin's small arms around his waist.

"If that's how it's done ...," the boy said, and then something—was it his Padawan's newfound skill at levitation?—lifted them through the next shield as if they lay in the palm of a giant hand.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had never felt so close to such a powerful connection with the Force, not in Qui-Gon, nor Mace Windu. Not even in Yoda.

"I think we're going to make it!" Anakin said.

THE OLD REPUBLIC

(5,000–33 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

Long—long—ago in a galaxy far, far away ... some twenty-five thousand years before Luke Skywalker destroyed the first Death Star at the Battle of Yavin in *Star Wars: A New Hope* ... a large number of star systems and species in the center of the galaxy came together to form the Galactic Republic, governed by a Chancellor and a Senate from the capital city-world of Coruscant. As the Republic expanded via the hyperspace lanes, it absorbed new member worlds from newly discovered star systems; it also expanded its military to deal with the hostile civilizations, slavers, pirates, and gangster-species such as the slug-like Hutts that were encountered in the outward exploration. But the most vital defenders of the Republic were the Jedi Knights. Originally a reclusive order dedicated to studying the mysteries of the life energy known as the Force, the Jedi became the Republic's guardians, charged by the Senate with keeping the peace—with wise words if possible; with lightsabers if not.

But the Jedi weren't the only Force-users in the galaxy. An ancient civil war had pitted those Jedi who used the Force selflessly against those who allowed themselves to be ruled by their ambitions—which the Jedi warned led to the dark side of the Force. Defeated in that long-ago war, the dark siders fled beyond the galactic frontier, where they built a civilization of their own: the Sith Empire.

The first great conflict between the Republic and the Sith Empire occurred when two hyperspace explorers stumbled on the Sith worlds, giving the Sith Lord Naga Sadow and his dark side warriors a direct invasion route into the Republic's central worlds. This war resulted in the first destruction of the Sith Empire—but it was hardly the last. For the next four thousand years, skirmishes between the Republic and Sith grew into wars, with the scales always tilting toward one or the other, and peace never lasting. The galaxy was a place of almost constant strife: Sith armies against Republic armies; Force-using Sith Lords against Jedi Masters and Jedi Knights; and the dreaded nomadic mercenaries called Mandalorians bringing muscle and firepower wherever they stood to gain.

Then, a thousand years before *A New Hope* and the Battle of Yavin, the Jedi defeated the Sith at the Battle of Ruusan, decimating the so-called Brotherhood of Darkness that was the heart of the Sith Empire—and most of its power.

One Sith Lord survived—Darth Bane—and his vision for the Sith differed from that of his predecessors. He instituted a new doctrine: No longer would the followers of the dark side build empires or amass great armies of Force-users. There would be only two Sith at a time: a Master and an apprentice. From that time on, the Sith remained in hiding, biding their time and plotting their revenge, while the rest of the galaxy enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace, so long and strong that the Republic eventually dismantled its standing armies.

But while the Republic seemed strong, its institutions had begun to rot. Greedy corporations sought profits above all else and a corrupt Senate did nothing to stop them, until the corporations reduced many planets to raw materials for factories and entire species became subjects for exploitation. Individual Jedi continued to defend

the Republic's citizens and obey the will of the Force, but the Jedi Order to which they answered grew increasingly out of touch. And a new Sith mastermind, Darth Sidious, at last saw a way to restore Sith domination over the galaxy and its inhabitants, and quietly worked to set in motion the revenge of the Sith ...

If you're a reader new to the Old Republic era, here are three great starting points:

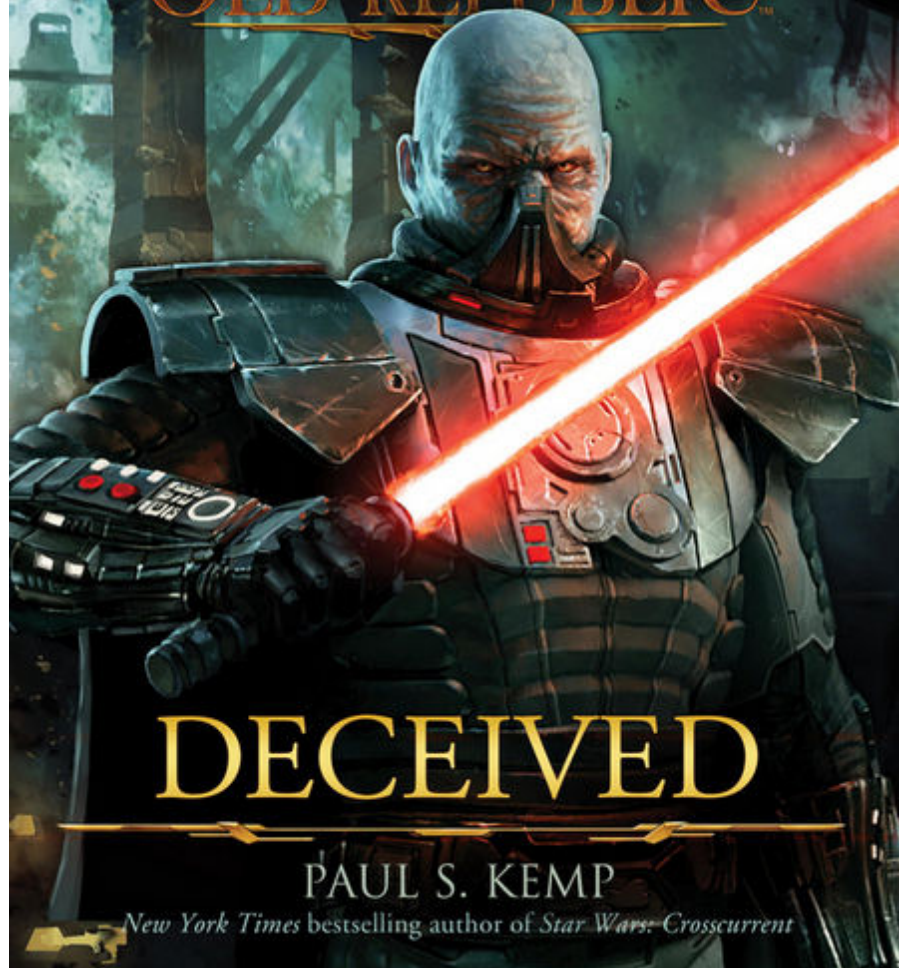
- *The Old Republic: Deceived*, by Paul S. Kemp: Kemp tells the tale of the Republic's betrayal by the Sith Empire, and features Darth Malgus, an intriguing, complicated villain.
- *Knight Errant*, by John Jackson Miller: Alone in Sith territory, the headstrong Jedi Kerra Holt seeks to thwart the designs of an eccentric clan of fearsome, powerful, and bizarre Sith Lords.
- *Darth Bane: Path of Destruction*, by Drew Karpysshyn: A portrait of one of the most famous Sith Lords, from his horrifying childhood to an adulthood spent in the implacable pursuit of vengeance.

Read on for an excerpt from a *Star Wars* novel set in the Old Republic era.

Based on the epic new videogame from BioWare and LucasArts

STAR WARS

THE
OLD REPUBLIC™



DECEIVED

PAUL S. KEMP

New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: Crosscurrent*



FATMAN SHIVERED, her metal groaning, as Zeerid pushed her through Ord Mantell's atmosphere. Friction turned the air to fire, and Zeerid watched the orange glow of the flames through the transparisteel of the freighter's cockpit.

He was gripping the stick too tightly, he realized, and relaxed.

He hated atmosphere entries, always had, the long forty-count when heat, speed, and ionized particles caused a temporary sensor blackout. He never knew what kind of sky he'd encounter when he came out of the dark. Back when he'd carted Havoc Squadron commandos in a Republic gully jumper, he and his fellow pilots had likened the blackout to diving blind off a seaside cliff.

You always hope to hit deep water, they'd say. But sooner or later the tide goes out and you go hard into rock.

Or hard into a blistering crossfire. Didn't matter, really. The effect would be the same.

"Coming out of the dark," he said as the flame diminished and the sky opened below.

No one acknowledged the words. He flew *Fatman* alone, worked alone. The only things he carted anymore were weapons for The Exchange. He had his reasons, but he tried hard not to think too hard about what he was doing.

He leveled the ship off, straightened, and ran a quick sweep of the surrounding sky. The sensors picked up nothing.

"Deep water and it feels fine," he said, smiling.

On most planets, the moment he cleared the atmosphere he'd have been busy dodging interdiction by the planetary government. But not on Ord Mantell. The planet was a hive of crime syndicates, mercenaries, bounty hunters, smugglers, weapons dealers, and spicerunners.

And those were just the people who ran the place.

Factional wars and assassinations occupied their attention, not governance, and certainly not law enforcement. The upper and lower latitudes of the planet in particular were sparsely settled and almost never patrolled, a literal no-being's-land. Zeerid would have been surprised if the government had survsats running orbits over the area.

And all that suited him fine.

Fatman broke through a thick pink blanket of clouds, and the brown, blue, and white of Ord Mantell's northern hemisphere filled out Zeerid's field of vision. Snow and ice peppered the canopy, frozen shrapnel, beating a steady rhythm on *Fatman's* hull. The setting sun suffused a large swath of the world with orange and red. The northern sea roiled below him, choppy and dark, the irregular white circles of breaking surf denoting the thousands of uncharted islands that poked through the water's surface. To the west, far in the distance, he could make out the hazy edge of a continent and the thin spine of snowcapped, cloud-topped mountains that ran along its north-south axis.

Motion drew his eye. A flock of leatherwings, too small to cause a sensor blip,

flew two hundred meters to starboard and well below him, the tents of their huge, membranous wings flapping slowly in the freezing wind, the arc of the flock like a parenthesis. They were heading south for warmer air and paid him no heed as he flew over and past them, their dull, black eyes blinking against the snow and ice.

He pulled back on the ion engines and slowed still further. A yawn forced itself past his teeth. He sat up straight and tried to blink away the fatigue, but it was as stubborn as an angry bantha. He'd given the ship to the autopilot and dozed during the hyperspace run from Vulta, but that was all the rack he'd had in the last two standard days. It was catching up to him.

He scratched at the stubble of his beard, rubbed the back of his neck, and plugged the drop coordinates into the navicomp. The comp linked with one of Ord Mantell's unsecured geosyncsats and fed back the location and course to *Fatman*. Zeerid's HUD displayed it on the cockpit canopy. He eyed the location and put his finger on the destination.

"Some island no one has ever heard of, up here where no one ever goes. Sounds about right."

Zeerid turned the ship over to the autopilot, and it banked him toward the island.

His mind wandered as *Fatman* cut through the sky. The steady patter of ice and snow on the canopy sang him a lullaby. His thoughts drifted back through the clouds to the past, to the days before the accident, before he'd left the marines. Back then, he'd worn the uniform proudly and had still been able to look himself in the mirror—

He caught himself, caught the burgeoning self-pity, and stopped the thoughts cold. He knew where it would lead.

"Stow that, soldier," he said to himself.

He was what he was, and things were what they were.

"Focus on the work, Z-man."

He checked his location against the coordinates in the navicomp. Almost there.

"Gear up and get frosty," he said, echoing the words he used to say to his commandos. "Ninety seconds to the LZ."

He continued his ritual, checking the charge on his blasters, tightening the straps on his composite armor vest, getting his mind right.

Ahead, he saw the island where he would make the drop: ten square clicks of volcanic rock fringed with a bad haircut of waist-high scrub whipping in the wind. The place would probably be underwater and gone next year.

He angled lower, flew a wide circle, unable to see much detail due to the snow. He ran a scanner sweep, as always, and the chirp of his instrumentation surprised him. A ship was already on the island. He checked his wrist chrono and saw that he was a full twenty standard minutes early. He'd made this run three times and Arigo—he was sure the man's real name was not Arigo—had never before arrived early.

He descended to a few hundred meters to get a better look.

Arigo's freighter, the *Doghhouse*, shaped not unlike the body of a legless beetle, sat in a clearing on the east side of the island. Its landing ramp was down and stuck out of its belly like a tongue. Halogens glared into the fading twilight and reflected off the falling snow, turning the flakes into glittering jewels. He saw three men lingering around the ramp, though he was too far away to notice any details other than their white winter parkas.

They spotted *Fatman*, and one waved a gloved hand.

Zeerid licked his lips and frowned.

Something felt off.

Flares went up from the freighter and burst in the air—green, red, red, green.

That was the correct sequence.

He circled one more time, staring down through the swirl of snow, but saw

nothing to cause alarm, no other ships on the island or in the surrounding sea. He pushed aside his concern and chalked his feelings up to the usual tension caused by dealing with miscreants and criminals.

In any event, he could not afford to mess up a drop of several hundred million credits of hardware because he felt skittish. The ultimate buyer—whoever that was—would be unhappy, and The Exchange would take the lost profits from Zeerid in blood and broken bones, then tack it on to the debt he already owed them. He'd lost track of exactly how much that was, but knew it was at least two million credits on the note for *Fatman* plus almost half that again on advances for Arra's medical treatment, though he'd kept Arra's existence a secret and his handler thought the latter were for gambling losses.

"LZ is secure." He hoped saying it would make it so. "Going in."

The hum of the reverse thrusters and a swirl of blown snow presaged the thump of *Fatman's* touching down on the rock. He landed less than fifty meters from Arigo's ship.

For a moment he sat in the cockpit, perfectly still, staring at the falling snow, knowing there'd be another drop after this one, then another, then another, and he'd still owe The Exchange more than he'd ever be able to pay. He was on a treadmill with no idea how to get off.

Didn't matter, though. The point was to earn for Arra, maybe get her a hoverchair instead of that wheeled antique. Better yet, prostheses.

He blew out a breath, stood, and tried to find his calm as he threw on a winter parka and fingerless gloves. In the cargo hold, he had to pick his way through the maze of shipping containers. He avoided looking directly at the thick black lettering on their sides, though he knew it by heart, had seen such crates many times in his military career.

**DANGER—MUNITIONS.
FOR MILITARY USE ONLY.
KEEP AWAY FROM INTENSE HEAT
OR OTHER ENERGY SOURCES.**

In the crates were upward of three hundred million credits' worth of crew-served laser cannons, MPAPPs, grenades, and enough ammunition to keep even the craziest fire team grinning and sinning for months.

Near the bay's landing ramp, he saw that three of the four securing straps had come loose from one of the crates of grenades. He was lucky the crate hadn't bounced around in transit. Maybe the straps had snapped when he set down on the island. He chose to believe that rather than admit to his own sloppiness.

He did not bother reattaching the straps. Arigo's men would have to undo them to unload anyway.

He loosened his blasters in their holsters and pushed the button to open the bay and lower the ramp. The door descended and snow and cold blew in, the tang of ocean salt. He stepped out into the wind. The light of the setting sun made him squint. He'd been in only artificial light for upward of twelve hours. His boots crunched on the snowdusted black rock. His exhalations steamed away in the wind.

Two of the men from Arrigo's freighter detached themselves from their ship and met him halfway. Both were human and bearded. One had a patched eye and a scar like a lightning stroke down one cheek. Both wore blasters on their hips. Like Zeerid, both had the butt straps undone.

Recognizing neither of them rekindled Zeerid's earlier concerns. He had a mind for faces, and both of the men were strangers.

The drop was starting to taste sour.

"Where's Arigo?" Zeerid asked.

"Doin' what Arigo does," Scar said, and gestured vaguely. "Sent us instead. No worries, though, right?"

No Scar shifted on his feet, antsy, twitchy.

Zeerid nodded, kept his face expressionless as his heart rate amped up and adrenaline started making him warm. Everything smelled wrong, and he'd learned over the years to trust his sense of smell.

"You Zeerid?" Scar asked.

"Z-man."

No one called him Zeerid except his sister-in-law.

And Aryn, once. But Aryn had been long ago.

"Z-man," echoed No Scar, shifting on his feet and half giggling.

"Sound funny to you?" Zeerid asked him.

Before No Scar could answer, Scar asked, "Where's the cargo?"

Zeerid looked past the two men before him to the third, who lingered near the landing ramp of Arigo's ship. The man's body language—too focused on the verbal exchange, too coiled—reinforced Zeerid's worry. He reminded Zeerid of the way rooks looked when facing Imperials for the first time, all attitude and hair trigger.

Suspicion stacked up into certainty. The drop didn't just smell bad, it was bad.

Arigo was dead, and the crew before him worked for some other faction on Ord Mantell, or worked for some organization sideways to The Exchange. Whatever. Didn't matter to Zeerid. He never bothered to follow who was fighting who, so he just trusted no one.

But what did matter to him was that the three men standing before him probably had tortured information from Arigo and would kill Zeerid as soon as they confirmed the presence of the cargo.

And there could be still more men hidden aboard the freighter.

It seemed he'd descended out of atmospheric blackout and into a crossfire after all.

What else was new?

"Why you call that ship *Fatman*?" No Scar asked. Arigo must have told them the name of Zeerid's ship because *Fatman* bore no identifying markings. Zeerid used fake ship registries on almost every planet on which he docked.

"'Cause it takes a lot to fill her belly."

"Ship's a she, though. Right? Why not *Fatwoman*?"

"Seemed disrespectful."

No Scar frowned. "Huh? To who?"

Zeerid did not bother to answer. All he'd wanted to do was drop off the munitions, retire some of his debt to The Exchange, and get back to his daughter before he had to get back out in the black and get dirty again.

"Something wrong?" Scar asked, his tone wary. "You look upset."

"No," Zeerid said, and forced a half smile. "Everything's the same as always."

The men plastered on uncertain grins, unclear on Zeerid's meaning.

"Right," Scar said. "Same as always."

Knowing how things would go, Zeerid felt the calm he usually did when danger impended. He flashed for a moment on Arra's face, on what she'd do if he died on Ord Mantell, on some no-name island. He pushed the thoughts away. No distractions.

"Cargo is in the main bay. Send your man around. The ship's open."

The expressions on the faces of both men hardened, the change nearly imperceptible but clear to Zeerid, a transformation that betrayed their intention to murder. Scar ordered No Scar to go check the cargo.

"He'll need a lifter," Zeerid said, readying himself, focusing on speed and

precision. "That stuff ain't a few kilos."

No Scar stopped within reach of Zeerid, looking back at Scar for guidance, his expression uncertain.

"Nah," said Scar, his hand hovering near his holster, the motion too casual to be casual. "I just want him to make sure it's all there. Then I'll let my people know to release payment."

He held up his arm as if to show Zeerid a wrist comlink, but the parka covered it.

"It's all there," Zeerid said.

"Go on," said Scar to No Scar. "Check it."

"Oh," Zeerid said, and snapped his fingers. "There is one other thing ..."

No Scar sighed, stopped, faced him, eyebrows raised in a question, breath steaming out of his nostrils. "What's that?"

Zeerid made a knife of his left hand and drove his fingertips into No Scar's throat. While No Scar crumpled to the snow, gagging, Zeerid jerked one of his blasters free of its hip holster and put a hole through Scar's chest before the man could do anything more than take a surprised step backward and put his hand on the grip of his own weapon. Scar staggered back two more steps, his mouth working but making no sound, his right arm held up, palm out, as if he could stop the shot that had already killed him.

As Scar toppled to the ground, Zeerid took a wild shot at the third man near the *Doghhouse's* landing ramp but missed high. The third man made himself small beside the *Doghhouse*, drew his blaster pistol, and shouted into a wrist comlink. Zeerid saw movement within the cargo bay of Arigo's ship—more men with ill intent.

No way to know how many.

He cursed, fired a covering shot, then turned and ran for *Fatman*. A blaster shot put a smoking black furrow through the sleeve of his parka but missed flesh. Another rang off the hull of *Fatman*. A third shot hit him square in the back. It felt like getting run over by a speeder. The impact drove the air from his lungs and plowed him face-first into the snow.

He smelled smoke. His armored vest had ablated the shot.

Adrenaline got him to his feet just as fast as he had gone down. Gasping, trying to refill his lungs, he ducked behind a landing skid for cover and wiped the snow from his face. He poked his head out for a moment to look back, saw that No Scar had stopped gagging and started being dead, that Scar stayed politely still, and that six more men were dashing toward him, two armed with blaster rifles and the rest with pistols.

His armor would not stop a rifle bolt.

A shot slammed into the landing skid, another into the snow at his feet, another, another.

"Stang!" he cursed.

The safety of *Fatman's* landing ramp and cargo bay, only a few steps from him, somehow looked ten kilometers away.

He took a blaster in each hand, stretched his arms around to either side of the landing skid, and fired as fast he could he pull the trigger in the direction of the onrushing men. He could not see and did not care if he hit anyone, he just wanted to get them on the ground. After he'd squeezed off more than a dozen shots with no return fire, he darted out from the behind the skid and toward the ramp.

He reached it before the shooters recovered enough to let loose another barrage. A few bolts chased him up the ramp, ringing off the metal. Sparks flew and the smell of melted plastoid mixed with the ocean air. He ran past the button to raise the ramp, struck at it, and hurried on toward the cockpit. Only after he'd nearly cleared the cargo bay did it register with him that he wasn't hearing the whirl of turning gears.

He whirled around, cursed.

In his haste, he'd missed the button to raise the landing ramp.

He heard shouts from outside and dared not go back. He could close the bay from the control panel in the cockpit. But he had to hurry.

He pelted through *Fatman's* corridors, shouldered open the door to the cockpit, and started punching in the launch sequence. *Fatman's* thrusters went live and the ship lurched upward. Blasterfire thumped off the hull but did no harm. He tried to look down out of the canopy, but the ship was angled upward and he could not see the ground. He punched the control to move it forward and heard the distant squeal of metal on metal. It had come from the cargo bay.

Something was slipping around in there.

The loose container of grenades.

And he'd still forgotten to seal the bay.

Cursing himself for a fool, he flicked the switch that brought up the ramp then sealed the cargo bay and evacuated it of oxygen. If anyone had gotten aboard, they would suffocate in there.

He took the controls in hand and fired *Fatman's* engines. The ship shot upward. He turned her as he rose, took a look back at the island.

For a moment, he was confused by what he saw. But realization dawned.

When *Fatman* had lurched up and forward, the remaining straps securing the container of grenades had snapped and the whole shipping container had slid right out the open landing ramp.

He was lucky it hadn't exploded.

The men who had ambushed him were gathered around the crate, probably wondering what was inside. A quick head count put their number at six, so he figured none had gotten on board *Fatman*. And none of them seemed to be making for Arigo's ship, so Zeerid assumed they had no intention of pursuing him in the air. Maybe they were happy enough with the one container.

Amateurs, then. Pirates, maybe.

Zeerid knew he would have to answer to Oren, his handler, not only for the deal going sour but also for the lost grenades.

Kriffing treadmill just kept going faster and faster.

He considered throwing *Fatman's* ion engines on full, clearing Ord Mantell's gravity well, and heading into hyperspace, but changed his mind. He was annoyed and thought he had a better idea.

He wheeled the freighter around and accelerated.

"Weapons going live," he said, and activated the over-and-under plasma cannons mounted on *Fatman's* sides.

The men on the ground, having assumed he would flee, did not notice him coming until he had closed to five hundred meters. Faces stared up at him, hands pointed, and the men started to scramble. A few blaster shots from one of the men traced red lines through the sky, but a blaster could not harm the ship.

Zeerid took aim. The targeting computer centered on the crate.

"LZ is hot," he said, and lit them up. For an instant pulsing orange lines connected the ship to the island, the ship to the crate of grenades. Then, as the grenades exploded, the lines blossomed into an orange cloud of heat, light, and smoke that engulfed the area. Shrapnel pattered against the canopy, metal this time, not ice, and the shock wave rocked *Fatman* slightly as Zeerid peeled the ship off and headed skyward.

He glanced back, saw six, motionless, smoking forms scattered around the blast radius.

"That was for you, Arigo."

He would still have some explaining to do, but at least he'd taken care of the

ambushers. That had to be worth something to The Exchange.
Or so he hoped.

DARTH MALGUS STRODE THE AUTOWALK, the steady rap of his boots on the pavement the tick of a chrono counting down the limited time remaining to the Republic.

Speeders, swoops, and aircars roared above him in unending streams, the motorized circulatory system of the Republic's heart. Skyrises, bridges, lifts, and plazas covered the entire surface of Coruscant to a height of kilometers, all of it the trappings of a wealthy, decadent civilization, a sheath that sought to hide the rot in a cocoon of duracrete and transparisteel.

But Malgus smelled the decay under the veneer, and he would show them the price of weakness, of complacency.

Soon it would all burn.

He would lay waste to Coruscant. He knew this. He had known it for decades.

Memories floated up from the depths of his mind. He recalled his first pilgrimage to Korriban, remembered the profound sense of holiness he had felt as he walked in isolation through its rocky deserts, through the dusty canyons lined with the tombs of his ancient Sith forebears. He had felt the Force everywhere, had exulted in it, and in his isolation it had showed him a vision. He had seen systems in flames, the fall of a galaxy-spanning government.

He had believed then, had *known* then and ever since, that the destruction of the Jedi and their Republic would fall to him.

"What are you thinking of, Veradun?" Eleena asked him.

Only Eleena called him by his given name, and only when they were alone. He enjoyed the smooth way the syllables rolled off her tongue and lips, but he tolerated it from no others.

"I am thinking of fire," he said, the hated respirator partially muffling his voice.

She walked beside him, as beautiful and dangerous as an elegantly crafted lanvarok. She clucked her tongue at his words, eyed him sidelong, but said nothing. Her lavender skin looked luminescent in the setting sun.

Crowds thronged the plaza in which they walked, laughing, scowling, chatting. A human child, a young girl, caught Malgus's eye when she squealed with delight and ran to the waiting arms of a dark-haired woman, presumably her mother. The girl must have felt his gaze. She looked at him from over her mother's shoulder, her small face pinched in a question. He stared at her as he walked and she looked away, burying her face in her mother's neck.

Other than the girl, no one else marked his passage. The citizens of the Republic felt safe so deep in the Core, and the sheer number of beings on Coruscant granted him anonymity. He walked among his prey, cowed, armored under his cloak, unnoticed and unknown, but heavy with purpose.

"This is a beautiful world," Eleena said.

"Not for very much longer."

His words seemed to startle her, though he could not imagine why. "Veradun ..."

He saw her swallow, look away. Whatever words she intended after his name seemed stuck on the scar that marred her throat.

"You may speak your mind, Eleena."

Still she looked away, taking in the scenery around them, as if memorizing Coruscant before Malgus and the Empire lit it aflame. "When will the fighting end?"

The premise of the question confounded him. "What do you mean?"

"Your life is war, Veradun. *Our* life. When will it end? It cannot always be so."

He nodded then, understanding the flavor of the conversation to come. She would

try to disguise self-perceived wisdom behind questions. As usual, he was of two minds about it. On the one hand, she was but a servant, a woman who provided him companionship when he wished it. On the other hand, she was Eleena. *His* Eleena.

"You choose to fight beside me, Eleena. You have killed many in the name of the Empire."

The lavender skin of her cheeks darkened to purple. "I have not killed for the Empire. I fight, and kill, for you. You know this. But you ... you fight for the Empire? Only for the Empire?"

"No. I fight because that is what I was made to do and the Empire is the instrument through which I realize my purpose. The Empire is war made manifest. That is why it is perfect."

She shook her head. "Perfect? Millions die in its wars. Billions."

"Beings die in war. That is the price that must be paid."

She stared at a group of children following an adult, perhaps a teacher. "The price for what? Why constant war? Why constant expansion? What is it the Empire wants? What is it *you* want?"

Behind his respirator, he smiled as he might when entertaining the questions of a precocious child.

"Want is not the point. I serve the Force. The Force is conflict. The Empire is conflict. The two are congruent."

"You speak as if it were mathematics."

"It is."

"The Jedi do not think so."

He fought down a flash of anger. "The Jedi understand the Force only partially. Some of them are even powerful in its use. But they fail to comprehend the fundamental nature of the Force, that it is conflict. That a light side and a dark side exist is proof of this."

He thought the conversation over, but she did not relent.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why conflict? Why would the Force exist to foment conflict and death?"

He sighed, becoming agitated. "Because the survivors of the conflict come to understand the Force more deeply. Their understanding evolves. That is purpose enough."

Her expression showed that she still did not understand. His tone sharpened as his exasperation grew.

"Conflict drives a more perfect understanding of the Force. The Empire expands and creates conflict. In that regard, the Empire is an instrument of the Force. You see? The Jedi do not understand this. They use the Force to repress themselves and others, to enforce their version of tolerance, harmony. They are fools. And they will see that after today."

For a time, Eleena said nothing, and the hum and buzz of Coruscant filled the silent gulf between them. When she finally spoke, she sounded like the shy girl he had first rescued from the slave pens of Geonosis.

"Constant war will be your life? Our life? Nothing more?"

He understood her motives at last. She wanted their relationship to change, wanted it, too, to evolve. But his dedication to the perfection of the Empire, which allowed him to perfect his understanding of the Force, precluded any preeminent attachments.

"I am a Sith warrior," he said.

"And things with us will always be as they are?"

"Master and servant. This displeases you?"

"You do not treat me as your servant. Not always."

He let a hardness he did not feel creep into his voice. "Yet a servant you are. Do not forget it."

The lavender skin of her cheeks darkened to purple, but not with shame, with anger. She stopped, turned, and stared directly into his face. He felt as if the cowl and respirator he wore hid nothing from her.

"I know your nature better than you know yourself. I nursed you after the Battle of Alderaan, when you lay near death from that Jedi witch. You speak the words in earnest—*conflict, evolution, perfection*—but belief does not reach your heart."

He stared at her, the twin stalks of her lekku framing the lovely symmetry of her face. She held his eyes, unflinching, the scar that stretched across her throat visible under her collar.

Struck by her beauty, he grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to him. She did not resist and pressed her curves against him. He slipped his respirator to the side and kissed her with his ruined lips, kissed her hard.

"Perhaps you do not know me as well as you imagine," he said, his voice unmuffled by the mechanical filter of his respirator.

As a boy, he had killed a Twi'lek servant woman in his adoptive father's house, his first kill. She had committed some minor offense he could no longer recall and that had never mattered. He had not killed her because of her misdeed. He'd killed her to assure himself that he *could* kill. He still recalled the pride with which his adoptive father had regarded the Twi'lek's corpse. Soon afterward, Malgus had been sent to the Sith Academy on Dromund Kaas.

"I think I do know you," she said, defiant.

He smiled, she smiled, and he released her. He replaced his respirator and checked the chrono on his wrist.

If all went as planned, the defense grid should come down in moments.

A surge of emotion went through him, born in his certainty that his entire life had for its purpose the next hour, that the Force had brought him to the moment when he would engineer the fall of the Republic and the ascendance of the Empire.

His comlink received a message. He tapped a key to decrypt it.

It is done, the words read.

The Mandalorian had done her job. He did not know the woman's real name, so in his mind she had become a title, the Mandalorian. He knew only that she worked for money, hated the Jedi for some personal reason known only to herself, and was extraordinarily skilled.

The message told him that the planet's defense grid had gone dark, yet none of the thousands of sentients who shared the plaza with him looked concerned. No alarm had sounded. Military and security ships were not racing through the sky. The civilian and military authorities were oblivious to the fact that Coruscant's security net had been compromised.

But they would notice it before long. And they would disbelieve what their instruments told them. They would run a test to determine if the readings were accurate.

By then, Coruscant would be aflame.

We are moving, he keyed into the device. *Meet us within*.

He took one last look around, at the children and their parents playing, laughing, eating, everyone going about their lives, unaware that everything was about to change.

"Come," he said to Eleena, and picked up his pace. His cloak swirled around him. So, too, his anger.

Moments later he received another coded transmission, this one from the hijacked drop ship.

Jump complete. On approach. Arrival in ninety seconds.

Ahead, he saw the four towers surrounding the stacked tiers of the Jedi Temple, its ancient stone as orange as fire in the light of the setting sun. The civilians seemed to give it a wide berth, as if it were a holy place rather than one of sacrilege.

He would reduce it to rubble.

He walked toward it and fate walked beside him.

Statues of long-dead Jedi Masters lined the approach to the Temple's enormous doorway. The setting sun stretched the statue's tenebrous forms across the duracrete. He walked through the shadows and past them, noting some names: Odan-Urr, Ooroo, Arca Jeth.

"You have been deceived," he whispered to them. "Your time is past."

Most of the Jedi Order's current Masters were away, either participating in the sham negotiations on Alderaan or protecting Republic interests offplanet, but the Temple was not entirely unguarded. Three uniformed Republic soldiers, blaster rifles in hand, stood watchful near the doors. He sensed two more on a high ledge to his left.

Eleena tensed beside him, but she did not falter.

He checked his chrono again. Fifty-three seconds.

The three soldiers, wary, watched him and Eleena approach. One of them spoke into a wrist comlink, perhaps querying a command center within.

They would not know what to make of Malgus. Despite the war, they felt safe in their enclave in the center of the Republic. He would teach them otherwise.

"Stop right there," one of them said.

"I cannot stop," Malgus said, too softly to hear behind the respirator. "Not ever."

STILL HEART, still mind, these things eluded Aryn, floated before her like snowflakes in sun, visible for a moment, then melted and gone. She fiddled with the smooth coral beads of the Nautolan tranquillity bracelet Master Zallow had given her when she'd been promoted to Jedi Knight. Silently counting the smooth, slick beads, sliding them over their chain one after another, she sought the calm of the Force.

No use.

What was wrong with her?

Outside, speeders hummed past the large window that looked out on a bucolic, beautiful Alderaanian landscape suitable for a painting. Inside, she felt turmoil. Ordinarily, she was better able to shield herself from surrounding emotions. She usually considered her empathic sense a boon of the Force, but now ...

She realized she was bouncing her leg, stopped. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. Did it again.

Syo sat beside her, callused hands crossed over his lap, as still as the towering statuary of Alderaanian statesmen that lined the domed, marble-tiled hall in which they sat. Light from the setting sun poured through the window, pushing long shadows across the floor. Syo did not look at her when he spoke.

"You are restless."

"Yes."

In truth, she felt as if she were a boiling pot, the steam of her emotional state seeking escape around the lid of her control. The air felt charged, agitated. She would have attributed the feelings to the stress of the peace negotiations, but it seemed to her something more. She felt a doom creeping up on her, a darkness. Was the Force trying to tell her something?

"Restlessness ill suits you," Syo said.

"I know. I feel ... odd."

His expression did not change behind his short beard, but he would know to take her feelings seriously. "Odd? How?"

She found his voice calming, which she supposed was part of the reason he had spoken. “As if ... as if something is about to happen. I can explain it no better than that.”

“This originates from the Force, from your empathy?”

“I don’t know. I just ... feel like something is about to happen.”

He seemed to consider this, then said, “Something is about to happen.” He indicated with a glance the large double doors to their left, behind which Master Dar’nala and Jedi Knight Satele Shan had begun negotiations with the Sith delegation. “An end to the war, if we are fortunate.”

She shook her head. “Something other than that.” She licked her lips, shifted in her seat.

They sat in silence for a time. Aryn continued to fidget.

Syo cleared his throat, and his brown eyes fixed on a point across the hall. He spoke in a soft tone. “*They* see your agitation. They interpret it as something it is not.”

She knew. She could feel their contempt, an irritation in her mind akin to a pebble in her boot.

A pair of dark-cloaked Sith, members of the Empire’s delegation to Alderaan, sat on a stone bench along the wall opposite Aryn and Syo. Fifteen meters of polished marble floor, the two rows of Alderaanian statuary, and the gulf of competing philosophies separated Jedi and Sith.

Unlike Aryn, the Sith did not appear agitated. They appeared coiled. Both of them leaned forward, forearms on their knees, eyes on Aryn and Syo, as if they might spring to their feet at any moment. Aryn sensed their derision over her lack of control, could see it in the curl of the male’s lip.

She turned her eyes from the Sith and tried to occupy her mind by reading the names engraved on the pedestals of the statues—Keers Dorana, Velben Orr, others she’d never heard of—but the presence of the Sith pressed against her Force sensitivity. She felt as if she were submerged deep underwater, the pressure pushing against her. She kept waiting for her ears to pop, to grant her release in a flash of pain. But it did not come, and her eyes kept returning to the Sith pair.

The woman, her slight frame lost in the shapelessness of her deep blue robes, glared through narrow, pale eyes. Her long dark hair, pulled into a topknot, hung like a hangman’s noose from her scalp. The slim human man who sat beside her had the same sallow skin as the woman, the same pale eyes, the same glare. Aryn assumed them to be siblings. His dark hair and long beard—braided and forked into two tines—could not hide a face so lined with scars and pitted with pockmarks that it reminded Aryn of the ground after an artillery barrage. Her eyes fell to the thin hilt of the man’s lightsaber, the bulky, squared-off hilt of the woman’s.

She imagined their parents had noticed brother and sister’s Force potential when they had been young and shipped them off to Dromund Kaas for indoctrination. She knew that’s what they did with Force-sensitives in the Empire. If true, the Sith sitting across from her hadn’t really *fallen* to the dark side; they’d never had a chance to rise and become anything else.

She wondered how she might have turned out had she been born in the Empire. Would she have trained at Dromund Kaas, her empathy put in service to pain and torture?

“Do not pity them,” Syo said in Bocce, as if reading her thoughts. Bocce sounded awkward on his lips. “Or doubt yourself.”

His insight surprised her only slightly. He knew her well. “Who is the empath now?” she answered in the same tongue.

“They chose their path. As we all do.”

“I know,” she said.

She shook her head over the wasted potential, and the eyes of both Sith tracked her movement with the alert, focused gaze of predators tracking prey. The Academy at Dromund Kaas had turned them into hunters, and they saw the universe through a hunter's eyes. Perhaps that explained the war in microcosm.

But it did nothing to explain the proposed peace.

And perhaps that was why Aryn felt so ill at ease.

The offer to negotiate an end to the war had come like a lightning strike from the Sith Emperor, unbidden, unexpected, sending a jolt through the government of the Republic. The Empire and the Republic had agreed to a meeting on Alderaan, the scene of an earlier Republic victory in the war, the number and makeup of the two delegations limited and strictly proscribed. To her surprise, Aryn was among the Jedi selected, though she was stationed perpetually *outside* the negotiation room.

"You have been honored by this selection," Master Zallow had told her before she took the ship for Alderaan, and she knew it to be true, yet she had felt uneasy since leaving Coruscant. She felt even less at ease on Alderaan. It wasn't that she had fought on Alderaan before. It was ... something else.

"I am fine," she said to Syo, hoping that saying it would work a spell and make it so. "Lack of sleep perhaps."

"Be at ease," he said. "Everything will work out."

She nodded, trying to believe it. She closed her eyes on the Sith and fell back on Master Zallow's teachings. She felt the Force within and around her, a matrix of glowing lines created by the intersection of all living things. As always, the line of Master Zallow glowed as brightly as a guiding star in her inner space.

She missed him, his calm presence, his wisdom.

Focusing inward, she picked a point in her mind, made it a hole, and let her unease drain into it.

Calm settled on her.

When she opened her eyes, she fixed them on the male Sith. Something in his expression, a knowing look in his eye, half hidden by his sneer, troubled Aryn, but she kept her face neutral and held his gaze, as still as a sculpture.

"I see you," the Sith said from across the room.

"And I you," she answered, her voice steady.

RISE OF THE EMPIRE

(33–0 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

This is the era of the *Star Wars* prequel films, in which Darth Sidious's schemes lead to the devastating Clone Wars, the betrayal and destruction of the Jedi Order, and the Republic's transformation into the Empire. It also begins the tragic story of Anakin Skywalker, the boy identified by the Jedi as the Chosen One of ancient prophecy, the one destined to bring balance to the Force. But, as seen in the movies, Anakin's passions lead him to the dark side, and he becomes the legendary masked and helmeted villain Darth Vader.

Before his fall, however, Anakin spends many years being trained as a Jedi by Obi-Wan Kenobi. When the Clone Wars break out, pitting the Republic against the secessionist Trade Federation, Anakin becomes a war hero and one of the galaxy's greatest Jedi Knights. But his love for the Naboo Queen and Senator Padmé Amidala, and his friendship with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine—secretly known as the Sith Lord Darth Sidious—will be his undoing ...

If you're a reader looking to jump into the Rise of the Empire era, here are five great starting points:

- *Labyrinth of Evil*, by James Luceno: Luceno's tale of the last days of the Clone Wars is equal parts compelling detective story and breakneck adventure, leading directly into the beginning of *Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith*.
- *Revenge of the Sith*, by Matthew Stover: This masterfully written novelization fleshes out the on-screen action of Episode III, delving deeply into everything from Anakin's internal struggle and the politics of the dying Republic to the intricacies of lightsaber combat.
- *Republic Commando: Hard Contact*, by Karen Traviss: The first of the Republic Commando books introduces us to a band of clone soldiers, their trainers, and the Jedi generals who lead them, mixing incisive character studies with a deep understanding of the lives of soldiers at war.
- *Death Troopers*, by Joe Schreiber: A story of horror aboard a Star Destroyer that you'll need to read with the lights on. Supporting roles by Han Solo and his Wookiee sidekick, Chewbacca, are just icing on the cake.
- *The Han Solo Adventures*, by Brian Daley: Han and Chewie come to glorious life in these three swashbuckling tales of smuggling, romance, and danger in the early days before they meet Luke and Leia.

Read on for an excerpt from a *Star Wars* novel set in the Rise of the Empire era.

The book cover features a dynamic illustration of Jedi Master Mace Windu in the foreground, holding his lightsaber and looking intensely at the viewer. In the background, the face of Count Dooku is visible, surrounded by a lush, alien jungle environment with vibrant green and blue foliage. The title 'STAR WARS' is written in large, bold, red letters with a yellow outline, and 'SHATTERPOINT' is in yellow letters with a black outline.

STAR WARS

SHATTERPOINT

(A CLONE WARS NOVEL)

With
a new
prologue by
George
Lucas!

MATTHEW STOVER

New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Traitor*

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF MACE WINDU

In my dreams, I always do it right.

In my dreams, I'm on the arena balcony. Geonosis. Orange glare slices shadow from my eyes. Below on the sand: Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker, Senator Padmé Amidala. On the rough-shaped stone within reach of my arm: Nute Gunray. Within reach of my blade: Jango Fett.

And Master Dooku.

No. Master no more. *Count* Dooku.

I may never get used to calling him that. Even in dreams.

Jango Fett bristles with weapons. An instinctive killer: the deadliest man in the galaxy. Jango can kill me in less than a second. I know it. Even if I had never seen Kenobi's report from Kamino, I can feel the violence Jango radiates: in the Force, a pulsar of death.

But I do it *right*.

My blade doesn't light the underside of Fett's square jaw. I don't waste time with words. I don't hesitate.

I *believe*.

In my dreams, the purple flare of my blade sizzles the gray hairs of Dooku's beard, and in the critical semisecond it takes Jango Fett to aim and fire, I twitch that blade and take Dooku with me into death.

And save the galaxy from civil war.

I could have done it.

I *could have done it*.

Because I knew. I could *feel* it.

In the swirl of the Force around me, I could feel the connections Dooku had forged among Jango and the Trade Federation, the Geonosians, the whole Separatist movement: connections of greed and fear, of deception and bald intimidation. I did not know what they were—I did not know how Dooku had forged them, or why—but I felt their power: the power of what I now know is a web of treason he had woven to catch the galaxy.

I could feel that without him to maintain its weave, to repair its flaws and double its thinning strands, the web would rot, would shrivel and decay until a mere breath would shred it and scatter its strings into the infinite stellar winds.

Dooku was the shatterpoint.

I knew it.

That is my gift.

Imagine a Corusca gem: a mineral whose interlocking crystalline structure makes it harder than durasteel. You can strike one with a five-kilo hammer and do no more than dent the hammer's face. Yet the same crystalline structure that gives the Corusca strength also gives it shatterpoints: spots where a precise application of carefully measured force—no more than a gentle tap—will break it into pieces. But to find these shatterpoints, to use them to shape the Corusca gem into beauty and utility, requires years of study, an intimate understanding of crystal structure, and rigorous practice to train the hand in the perfect combination of strength and precision to produce the desired cut.

Unless you have a talent like mine.

I can see shatterpoints.

The sense is not sight, but see is the closest word Basic has for it: it is a perception, a *feel* of how what I look upon fits into the Force, and how the Force binds it to itself and to everything else. I was six or seven standard years old—well into my training in the Jedi Temple—before I realized that other students, full-grown Jedi Knights, even wise Masters, could sense such connections only with difficulty, and only with concentration and practice. The Force shows me strengths and weaknesses, hidden flaws and unexpected uses. It shows me vectors of stress that squeeze or stretch, torque or shear; it shows me how patterns of these vectors intersect to form the matrix of reality.

Put simply: when I look at you through the Force, I can see where you break.

I looked at Jango Fett on the sand in the Geonosian arena. A perfect combination of weapons, skills, and the will to use them: an interlocking crystal of killer. The Force hinted a shatterpoint, and I left a headless corpse on the sand. The deadliest man in the galaxy.

Now: just dead.

Situations have shatterpoints, like gems. But those of situations are fluid, ephemeral, appearing for a bare instant, vanishing again to leave no trace of their existence. They are always a function of timing.

There is no such thing as a second chance.

If—*when*—I next encounter Dooku, he will be the war's shatterpoint no longer. I can't stop this war with a single death.

But on that day in the Geonosian arena, I could have.

Some days after the battle, Master Yoda had found me in a meditation chamber at the Temple. "Your friend he was," the ancient Master had said, even as he limped through the door. It is a peculiar gift of Yoda's that he always seems to know what I'm thinking. "Respect you owed him. Even affection. Cut him down you could not—not for merely a *feeling*."

But I could have.

I should have.

Our Order prohibits personal attachments for precisely this reason. Had I not honored him so—even loved him—the galaxy might be at peace right now. *Merely a feeling*, Yoda said.

I am a Jedi.

I have been trained since birth to trust my feelings.

But which feelings should I trust?

When I faced the choice to kill a former Jedi Master, or to save Kenobi and young Skywalker and the Senator ... I let the Force choose for me. I followed my instincts.

I made the Jedi choice.

And so: Dooku escaped. And so: the galaxy is at war. And so: many of my friends have been slaughtered.

There is no such thing as a second chance.

Strange: Jedi I am, yet I drown in regret for having *spared* a life.

Many survivors of Geonosis suffer from nightmares. I have heard tale after tale from the Jedi healers who have counseled them. Nightmares are inevitable; there has not been such a slaughter of Jedi since the Sith War, four thousand years ago. None of them could have imagined how it would feel to stand in that arena, surrounded by the corpses of their friends, in the blazing orange noon and the stench and the blood-soaked sand. I may be the only veteran of Geonosis who doesn't have nightmares of that place.

Because in *my* dreams, I always do it *right*.

My nightmare is what I find when I wake up.

Jedi have shatterpoints, too.

Mace Windu stopped in the doorway and tried to recover his calm. An arc of sweat darkened the cowl of his robe, and his tunic clung to his skin: he'd come straight from a training bout at the Temple without taking time to shower. And the brisk pace—almost a jog—he'd maintained through the labyrinth of the Galactic Senate had offered no chance for him to cool off.

Palpatine's private office, in the Supreme Chancellor's suite beneath the Senate's Great Rotunda, opened before him, vast and stark. An expanse of polished ebonite floor; a few simple, soft chairs; a flat trestle desk, also ebonite. No pictures, paintings, or decorations other than two lone statues; only floor-to-ceiling holographic repeaters showing real-time images of Galactic City as seen from the pinnacle of the Senate Dome. Outside, the orbital mirrors would soon turn their faces from Coruscant's sun, bringing twilight to the capital.

Within was only Yoda. Alone. Perched solemnly on his hoverchair, hands folded around the head of his stick. "On time you are," the ancient Master observed, "but barely. Take a chair; composed we must be. Serious, I fear this is."

"I wasn't expecting a party." Mace's boot heels clacked on the polished floor. He pulled one of the soft, plain chairs closer to Yoda and sat beside him, facing the desk. Tension made his jaw ache. "The courier said this is about the operation on Haruun Kal."

The fact that of all the members of the Jedi Council and the Republic High Command, only the two senior members of the Council had been summoned by the Chancellor, implied that the news was not good.

These two senior members could hardly have appeared more different. Yoda was barely two-thirds of a meter tall, with skin green as Chadian wander-kelp and great bulging eyes that could sometimes seem almost to take on a light of their own; Mace was tall for a human, less than a hand's breadth short of two meters, with shoulders broad and powerful, heavy arms, dark eyes, and a grim set to his jaw. Where Yoda had let his sparse remnants of hair straggle at random, Mace's skull was smooth-shaven, the color of polished lammas.

But their greatest difference perhaps lay in the feel of the two Jedi Masters. Yoda emanated a sense of mellow wisdom, combined with the impish sense of humor characteristic of the true sage; but his great age and vast experience sometimes made him seem a bit removed, even detached. Nearing nine hundred years of age led him to naturally take the long view. Mace, in contrast, had been elevated to the Jedi Council before his thirtieth birthday. His demeanor was exactly opposite. Lean. Driven. Intense. He radiated incisive intellect and unconquerable will.

As of the Battle of Geonosis, which had opened the Clone Wars, Mace had been on the Council for more than twenty standard years. It had been ten since anyone had last seen him smile.

He sometimes wondered privately if he would ever smile again.

"But it is not the planet Haruun Kal that brings you in a sweat to this office," Yoda said now. His tone was light and understanding, but his gaze was sharp. "Concerned for Depa, you are."

Mace lowered his head. "I know: the Force will bring what it will. But Republic Intelligence has reported that the Separatists have pulled back; their base outside Pelek Baw is abandoned—"

"Yet return she has not."

Mace knotted his fingers together. A breath brought his voice back to its customary deep, flat dispassion. "Haruun Kal is still nominally a Separatist planet. And she's a wanted woman. It won't be easy for her to get offworld. Or even to signal for extraction—the local militia use all kinds of signal jamming, and whatever they don't jam they triangulate; whole partisan bands have been wiped out by one incautious transmission—"

“Your friend she is.” Yoda used his stick to poke Mace on the arm. “Care for her, you do.”

Mace didn’t meet his eyes. His feelings for Depa Billaba ran deep.

She had been onworld for four standard months. She couldn’t communicate regularly; Mace had tracked her activities by sporadic Republic Intelligence reports of sabotage at the Separatist starfighter base, and the fruitless expeditions of the Balawai militias trying—and failing—to wipe out Depa’s guerrillas, or even contain them. More than a month ago, Republic Intelligence had sent word that the Separatists had pulled back to the Gevarno Cluster, because they could no longer maintain and defend their base. Her success could not have been more brilliant.

But he feared to learn at what cost.

“But it can’t simply be that she’s missing, or ...,” he murmured. A dark flush spread over his bare dome of skull when he realized he’d spoken his thoughts aloud. He felt Yoda’s eyes on him still, and gave half an apologetic shrug. “I was only thinking: if she’d been captured or—or killed—there would be no need for such secrecy ...”

The creases on Yoda’s face deepened around his mouth, and he made that *tchk* sound of mild disapproval that any Jedi would instantly recognize. “Frivolous, speculation is, when patience will reveal all.”

Mace nodded silently. One did not argue with Master Yoda; in the Jedi Temple, this was learned in infancy. No Jedi ever forgot it. “It’s ... maddening, Master. If only ... I mean, ten years ago, we could have simply reached out—”

“Cling to the past, a Jedi *cannot*,” Yoda interrupted sternly. His green stare reminded Mace not to speak of the shadow that had darkened Jedi perception of the Force. This was not discussed outside the Temple. Not even here. “Member of the Jedi Council, she is. Powerful Jedi. Brilliant warrior—”

“She’d better be.” Mace tried to smile. “I trained her.”

“But worry you do. Too much. Not only for Depa, but for all the Jedi. Ever since Geonosis.”

The smile wasn’t working. He stopped trying. “I don’t want to talk about Geonosis.”

“Known this for months, I have.” Yoda poked him again, and Mace looked up. The ancient Master leaned toward him, ears curled forward, and his huge green eyes glimmered softly. “But when, finally, to talk you want ... listen, I will.”

Mace accepted this with a silent inclination of his head. He’d never doubted it. But still, he preferred to discuss something else.

Anything else.

“Look at this place,” he murmured, nodding at the expanse of the Supreme Chancellor’s office. “Even after ten years, the difference between Palpatine and Valorum ... How this office was, in those days—”

Yoda lifted his head in that reverse nod of his. “Remember Finis Valorum well, I do. Last of a great line, he was.” Some vast distance drifted through his gaze: he might have been looking back along his nine hundred years as a Jedi.

It was unsettling to contemplate that the Republic, seemingly eternal in its millennium-long reign, was not much older than Yoda himself. Sometimes, in the tales Yoda told of his long-vanished younger days, a Jedi might have heard the youth of the Republic itself: brash, confident, bursting with vitality as it expanded across the galaxy, bringing peace and justice to cluster after cluster, system after system, world after world.

For Mace, it was even more unsettling to contemplate the contrast Yoda was seeing.

“Connected with the past, Valorum was. Rooted deep in tradition’s soil.” In the wave of his hand, Yoda seemed to summon Finis Valorum’s dazzling array of antique

furniture gleaming with exotic oils, his artworks and sculptures and treasures from a thousand worlds. Legacies of thirty generations of House Valorum had once filled this office. “Perhaps *too* deep: a man of history, was Valorum. Palpatine ...” Yoda’s eyes drifted closed. “A man of today, Palpatine is.”

“You say that as though it pains you.”

“Perhaps it does. Or perhaps: my pain is only of this day, not its man.”

“I prefer the office like this.” Mace half nodded around the sweep of open floor. Austere. Unpretentious and uncompromising. To Mace, it was a window into Palpatine’s character: the Supreme Chancellor lived entirely for the Republic. Simple in dress. Direct in speech. Unconcerned with ornamentation or physical comfort. “A shame he can’t touch the Force. He might have made a fine Jedi.”

“But then, another Supreme Chancellor would we need.” Yoda smiled gently. “Better this way, perhaps it is.”

Mace acknowledged the point with a slight bow.

“Admire him, you do.”

Mace frowned. He’d never thought about it. His adult life had been spent at the orders of the Supreme Chancellor ... but he served the office, not the man. What did he think of the Supreme Chancellor as a person? What difference could that make?

“I suppose I do.” Mace vividly recalled what the Force had shown him while he watched Palpatine sworn in as Supreme Chancellor, ten years before: Palpatine was himself a shatterpoint on which the future of the Republic—perhaps even the whole galaxy—depended. “The only other person I can imagine leading the Republic through this dark hour is ... well—” He opened a hand. “—*you*, Master Yoda.”

Yoda rocked back on his hoverchair and made the rustling snuffle that served him for a laugh. “No politician am I, foolish one.”

He still occasionally spoke as though Mace were a student. Mace didn’t mind. It made him feel young. Everything else these days made him feel old.

Yoda’s laughter faded. “And no fit leader for this Republic would I be.” He lowered his voice even further, to barely above a whisper. “Clouded by darkness are my eyes; the Force shows me only suffering, and destruction, and the rise of a long, long night. Better off without the Force, leaders perhaps are; able to see well enough, young Palpatine seems.”

“Young” Palpatine—who had at least ten years on Mace, and looked twice that—chose that moment to enter the room, accompanied by another man. Yoda stepped down from his hoverchair. Mace rose in respect. The Jedi Masters bowed, greeting the Supreme Chancellor with their customary formality. He waved the courtesies aside. Palpatine looked tired: flesh seemed to be dissolving beneath his sagging skin, deepening his already hollowed cheeks.

The man with Palpatine was hardly larger than a boy, though clearly well past forty; lank, thinning brown hair draped a face so thoroughly undistinguished that Mace could forget it the instant he glanced away. His eyes were red-rimmed, he held a cloth handkerchief to his nose, and he looked so much like some minor bureaucratic functionary—a clerk in a dead-end government post, with job security and absolutely nothing else—that Mace automatically assumed he was a spy.

“We have news of Depa Billaba.”

Despite his earlier reasoning, the simple sadness in the Chancellor’s voice sent Mace’s stomach plummeting.

“This man has just come from Haruun Kal. I’m afraid— well, perhaps you should simply examine the evidence for yourself.”

“What is it?” Mace’s mouth went dry as ash. “Has she been captured?” The treatment a captured Jedi could expect from Dooku’s Separatists had been demonstrated on Geonosis.

“No, Master Windu,” Palpatine said. “I’m afraid—I’m afraid it’s quite a bit worse.”

The agent opened a large travelcase and produced an old-fashioned holoprojector. He spent a moment fiddling with controls, and then an image bloomed above the mirror-polished ebonite that served as Palpatine's desk.

Yoda's ears flattened, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Palpatine looked away. "I have seen too much of this already," he said.

Mace's hands became fists. He couldn't seem to get his breath.

The shimmering corpses were each the size of his finger. He counted nineteen. They looked human, or close to it. There was a scatter of prefabricated huts, blasted and burned and broken. The ruins of what must have once been a stockade wall made a ring around the scene. The jungle that surrounded them all stood four decimeters high, and covered a meter and a half of Palpatine's desk.

After a moment, the agent sniffled apologetically. "This is—er, *seems* to be—the work of Loyalist partisans, under the command of Master Billaba."

Yoda stared.

Mace stared.

There—those wounds ... Mace needed a better view. When he reached into the jungle, his hand crawled with the bright ripples of the holoprojector's scanning-matrix lasers. "These."

He passed his hand through a group of three bodies that gaped with ragged wounds. "Enhance these."

The Republic Intelligence agent answered without taking his handkerchief away from his reddened eyes. "Uh, I'm uh—Master Windu, this recording is, er, is quite unsophisticated—almost, uh, *primitive*—" His voice vanished into a sneeze that jerked him forward as though he'd been slapped on the back of the head. "Sorry—sorry, I can't—my system won't tolerate histamine suppressors. Every time I come to Coruscant—"

Mace's hand didn't move. He didn't look up. He waited while the agent's whine trickled to silence. Nineteen corpses. And this man complained about his *allergies*.

"Enhance these," Mace repeated.

"I, ah—yes. Sir." The agent manipulated the holoprojector's controls with hands that didn't quite tremble. Not quite. The jungle flicked out of existence. It reappeared an instant later, spread across ten meters of the office's floor. The tangled upper branches of the holographic trees had become glimmering scan patterns on the ceiling; the corpses were now almost half life-sized.

The agent ducked his head, scrubbing furiously at his nose with the handkerchief. "Sorry, Master Windu. Sorry. But the system—it's—"

"Primitive. Yes." Mace waded through the light-cast images until he could squat beside the bodies. He rested his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together before his face.

Yoda walked closer, then crouched as he leaned in for a better view. After a moment, Mace looked up into his sad green eyes. "See?"

"Yes ... yes," Yoda croaked. "But from this, no conclusion can be drawn."

"That's my *point*."

"For those of us who are not Jedi—" Supreme Chancellor Palpatine's voice had the warm strength of a career politician's. He rounded his desk, on his face the slightly puzzled smile of a good man who faced an ugly situation with hope that everything might still turn out all right. "—perhaps you'll explain?"

"Yes, sir. The other bodies don't tell us much, between decomposition and scavenger damage. But some of the mutilation on the soft tissue here—" A curve of Mace's hand traced gaping slashes across a holographic female torso. "—isn't from claws or teeth. And they didn't come from a powered weapon. See the scoring on her ribs? A lightsaber—even a vibroblade—would have slashed right through the bone. This was done with a dead blade, sir."

Revolusion tightened the Supreme Chancellor's face. "A—dead blade? You mean just—like a piece of *metal*? Just a sharp piece of metal?"

"A very sharp piece of metal, sir." Mace cocked his head a centimeter to the right. "Or ceramic. Transparisteel. Even carbonite."

Palpatine took a deep breath as though suppressing a shudder. "It sounds ... dreadfully crude. And painful."

"Sometimes it is, sir. Not always." He didn't bother to explain how he knew. "But these slashes are parallel, and all of nearly the same length; it's likely she was dead before the cuts were made. Or at least unconscious."

"Or—" The agent sniffled, and coughed apologetically. "—just, er, y'know, *tied up*."

Mace stared at him. Yoda closed his eyes. Palpatine lowered his head as though in pain.

"There is, uh, a history of, uh, I guess you'd say, *recreational torture* in the Haruun Kal conflict. On both sides." The agent flushed as though he was ashamed to know such things. "Sometimes, people—people *hate* so much, that just *killing* the enemy isn't enough ..."

A fist clenched in Mace's chest: that this soft little man—this *civilian*—could accuse Depa Billaba of such an atrocity, even by implication, grabbed his heart with sick fury. A long cold stare showed him every place on this soft man's soft body where one sharp blow would kill; the agent blanched as if he could count them all in Mace's eyes.

But Mace had been a Jedi far too long for anger to gain an easy grip. A breath or two opened that fist around his heart, and he stood. "I have seen nothing to indicate Depa was involved."

"Master Windu—" Palpatine began.

"What was the military value of this outpost?"

"Military value?" The agent looked startled. "Why, none, I suppose. These were Balawai jungle prospectors. *Jups*, they call 'em. Some jups operate as a kind of irregular militia, but irregulars are nearly always men. There were six women here. And Balawai militia units never, ah, never bring their, ah, *children* ..."

"Children," Mace echoed.

The agent nodded reluctantly. "Three. Mm, bioscans indicate one girl about twelve, the other two possibly fraternal twins. Boy and a girl. About nine. Had to use bioscans ..." His sickly eyes asked Mace not to make him finish.

Because a few days in the jungle hadn't left enough of them to be identified any other way.

Mace said, "I understand."

"These weren't militia, Master Windu. Just Balawai jungle prospectors in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Jungle prospectors?" Palpatine appeared politely interested. "And what are *Balawai*?"

"Offworlders, sir," Mace said. "The jungles of Haruun Kal are the galaxy's sole source of thyssel bark, as well as portaak leaf, jinsol, tyruun, and lammas. Among others."

"Spices and exotic woods? And these are valuable enough to draw offworld emigrants? Into a *war* zone?"

"Have you priced thyssel bark lately?"

"I—" Palpatine smiled regretfully. "I don't care for it, actually. I suppose my tastes are pedestrian; you can take a boy out of the Mid Rim, but ..."

Mace shook his head. "Not relevant, sir. My point: these were civilians. Depa wouldn't be involved in something like this. She *couldn't*."

"Hasty, your statement is," Yoda said gravely. "Seen all evidence, I fear we have

not.”

Mace looked at the agent. The agent flushed again.

“Well, er, yes—Master Yoda is correct. This, uh, recording—” He twitched his head around at the ghostly corpses that filled the office. “—was made with the prospectors’ own equipment; it’s adapted to Haruun Kal work, where more sophisticated electronics—”

“I don’t need a lesson on Haruun Kal.” Mace’s voice went sharp. “I need your *evidence*.”

“Yes, yes of course, Master Windu ...” The agent fished in his travelcase for a second or two, then came up with an old-fashioned data wafer of crystal. He handed it over. “It’s, uh, audio only, but—we’ve done voiceprint analysis. It’s not exact—and there’s some ambient noise, other voices, jungle sounds, that kind of thing—but we put match probability in the ninety percent range.”

Mace weighed the crystal wafer in his hand. He stared down at it. There. Right there: the flick of a fingernail could crack it in two. *I should do it*, he thought. *Crush this thing. Snap it in half right now. Destroy it unheard.*

Because he knew. He could feel it. In the Force, stress lines spidered out from the wafer like frost scaling supercooled transparisteel. He could not read the pattern, but he could feel its power.

This would be ugly.

“Where did you find it?”

“It was—uh, at the scene. Of the massacre. It was ... well, at the scene.”

“Where did you *find* it?”

The agent flinched.

Again, Mace took a breath. Then another. With the third, the fist in his chest relaxed. “I am sorry.”

Sometimes he forgot how intimidating some men found his height and voice. Not to mention his reputation. He did not wish to be feared.

At least, not by those loyal to the Republic.

“Please,” he said. “It might be significant.”

The agent mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, it was in her *mouth*.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the holographic corpse at Mace’s feet. “Someone had ... fixed her jaw shut, so scavengers wouldn’t get at it when they ... well, y’know, scavengers prefer the, the, er, the tongue ...”

Nausea bloomed below Mace’s ribs. His fingertips tingled. He stared down at the woman’s image. Those marks on her face—he had thought they were just marks. Or some kind of fungus, or a colony of mold. Now his eyes made sense of them, and he wished they hadn’t: dull gold-colored lumps under her chin.

Brassvine thorns.

Someone had used them to nail her jaw shut.

He had to turn away. He realized that he had to sit down, too.

The agent continued, “Our station boss got a tip and sent me to check it out. I hired a steamcrawler from some busted-out jups, rented a handful of townies who can handle heavy weapons, and crawled up there. What we found ... well, you can see it. That data wafer—when I found it ...”

Mace stared at the man as though he’d never seen him before. And he hadn’t: only now, finally, was he truly *seeing* him. An undistinguished little man: soft face and uncertain voice, shaky hands and allergies: an undistinguished little man who must have resources of toughness that Mace could barely imagine. To have walked into a scene that Mace could barely stomach even in a bloodless, translucent laser image; to have had to smell them—*touch* them—to pry open a dead woman’s *mouth* ...

And then to bring the recordings here, so that he could live it all again—
Mace could have done it. He thought so. Probably. He'd been some places, and seen some things.

Not like this.

The agent said, "Our sources are pretty sure the tip came from the ULF itself."

Palpatine glanced a question. Mace spoke without taking his eyes off the agent. "The Upland Liberation Front, sir. That's Depa's partisan group; 'uplanders' is a rough translation of *Korunnai*—the name the mountain tribes give themselves."

"Korunnai?" Palpatine frowned absently. "Aren't those *your* people, Master Windu?"

"My ... kin." He made himself unclench his jaw. "Yes, Chancellor. You have a good memory."

"A politician's trick." Palpatine gave a gently self-deprecating smile and waved a dismissive hand. "Please go on."

The agent shrugged as though there was little more to tell. "There have been a lot of ... disturbing reports. Execution of prisoners. Ambushes of civilians. On both sides. Usually they can't be verified. The jungle ... swallows everything. So when we got this tip—"

"You found this because somebody wanted you to find it," Mace finished for him. "And now you think—"

Mace turned the data wafer over and over through his fingers, watching it catch splinters of light. "You think those people might have been killed just to deliver this message."

"What a hideous idea!" Palpatine lowered himself slowly onto the edge of his desk. He appealed to the agent. "This can't be true, can it?"

The agent only hung his head.

Yoda's ears curled backward, and his eyes narrowed. "Some messages ... most important, is how they are framed. Secondary, their content is."

Palpatine shook his head in disbelief. "These ULF partisans—we ally ourselves with *them*? The *Jedi* ally with them? What sort of monsters *are* they?"

"I don't know." Mace handed the wafer back to the agent. "Let's find out."

He slotted it into a port on the side of the holoprojector and touched a control.

The holoprojector's phased-wave speakers brought the jungle around them to life with noise: the rush of windrattled leaves, skrills and clatters of insect calls, dim dopplered shrieks of passing birds, the howls and coughs of distant predators. Through the eddies and boils of sound drifted a whisper sinuous as a riversnake: a human or near-human whisper, a voice murmuring in Basic, sometimes comprehensible for a word here or phrase there, sometimes twisting below the distorting ripples of the aural surface. Mace caught the words *Jedi*, and *night*—or *knife*—and something about *look between the stars* ...

He frowned at the agent. "You can't clean this up?"

"This *is* cleaned up." The agent produced a datapad from his travelcase, keyed it alight, and passed it to Mace. "We made a transcript. It's provisional. Best we can do."

The transcript was fragmentary, but enough to draw chills up Mace's arms: *Jedi Temple ... taught* (or possibly *taut*) ... *dark ... an enemy. But ... Jedi ... under cover of night.*

One whisper was entirely clear. He read the words on the datapad's screen as the whisper seemed to come from just behind his shoulder.

I use the night, and the night uses me.

He forgot to breathe. This was bad.

It got worse.

The whisper strengthened to a voice. A woman's voice.

Depa's voice.

On the datapad in his hand, and murmuring in the air behind his shoulder—

I have become the darkness in the jungle.

The recording went on. And on.

Her murmur drained him: of emotion, of strength, even of thought; the longer she rambled, the emptier he got. Yet her final words still triggered a dull shock inside his chest.

She was talking to *him* ...

I know you will come for me, Mace. You should never have sent me here. And I should never have come. But what's done can never be undone. I know you think I've gone mad. I haven't. What's happened to me is worse.

I've gone sane.

That's why you'll come, Mace. That's why you'll have to.

Because nothing is more dangerous than a Jedi who's finally sane.

Her voice trailed off into the jungle-mutter.

No one moved or spoke. Mace sat with interlocked fingers supporting his chin. Yoda leaned on his cane, eyes shut, mouth pinched with inner pain. Palpatine stared solemnly through the holographic jungle, as though he saw something real beyond its boundary.

"That's—uh, that's all there is." The agent extended a hesitant hand to the holoprojector and flicked a control. The jungle vanished like a bad dream.

They all stirred, rousing themselves, instinctively adjusting their clothing. Palpatine's office now looked unreal: as though the clean carpeted floor and crisp lines of furniture, the pure filtered air, and the view of Coruscant that filled the large windows were the holographic projection, and they all still sat in the jungle.

As though only the jungle were real.

Mace spoke first.

"She's right." He lifted his head from his hands. "I have to go after her. Alone."

Palpatine's eyebrows twitched. "That seems ... unwise."

"Concur with Chancellor Palpatine, I do," Yoda said slowly. "Great risks there would be. Too valuable you are. Send others, we should."

"There is no one else who can do this."

"Surely, Master Windu"—Palpatine's smile was respectfully disbelieving—"a Republic Intelligence covert ops team, or even a team of Jedi—"

"No." Mace rose, and straightened his shoulders. "It has to be me."

"Please, we all understand your concern for your former student, Master Windu, but surely—"

"Reasons he must have, Supreme Chancellor," Yoda said. "Listen to them, we should."

Even Palpatine found that one did not argue with Master Yoda.

Mace struggled to put his certainty into words. This difficulty was a function of his particular gift of perception. Some things were so obvious to him that they were hard to describe: like explaining how he knew it was raining while he stood in a thunderstorm.

"If Depa has ... gone mad—or worse, fallen to the dark side," he began, "it's vital that the Jedi know *why*. That we discover *what did it to her*. Until we know this, no more Jedi should be exposed to it than is absolutely necessary. Also, this all might be entirely false: a deliberate attempt to incriminate her. That ambient noise on the recording ..." He glanced at the agent. "If her voice was faked—say, synthesized by computer—that noise could be there precisely to blur the evidence of trickery, couldn't it?"

The agent nodded. "But why would someone want to frame her?"

Mace waved this off. "Regardless, she must be brought in. And soon—before

rumor of such massacres reaches the wider galaxy. Even if she had nothing to do with them, having a Jedi's name associated with these crimes is a threat to the public trust in the Jedi. She must answer any charges before they are ever publicly made."

"Granted, she must be brought in," Palpatine allowed. "But the question remains: why *you*?"

"Because she might not want to come."

Palpatine looked thoughtful.

Yoda's head came up, and his eyes opened, gleaming at the Supreme Chancellor. "If rogue she has gone ... to find her, difficult it will be. To apprehend her ..." His voice dropped, as though the words caused him pain. "Dangerous, that will be."

"Depa was my Padawan." Mace moved away from the desk and stared out the window at the shimmering twilight that slowly darkened the capital's cityscape. "The bond of Master and Padawan is ... intense. No one knows her better—and I have more experience in those jungles than any other living Jedi. I'm the only one who can find her if she doesn't want to be found. And if she must be—"

He swallowed, and stared at the moondisk of light scattered from one of the orbital mirrors. "If she must be ... stopped," he said at length, "I may be the only one who can do that, too."

Palpatine's eyebrows twitched polite incomprehension.

Mace took a deep breath, finding himself once more looking at his hands, *through* his hands, seeing only an image in his mind, sharp as a dream: lightsaber against lightsaber in the Temple's training halls, the green flash of Depa's blade seeming to come from everywhere at once.

He could not unmake what he had made.

There were no second chances.

Her voice echoed inside him: *Nothing is more dangerous than a Jedi who's finally sane*, but he said only—

"She is a master of Vaapad."

In the silence that followed, he studied the folds and wrinkles of his interlaced fingers, focusing his attention into his visual field to hold at bay dark dream-ghosts of Depa's blade flashing toward Jedi necks.

"Vaapad?" Palpatine repeated, eventually. Perhaps he'd grown tired of waiting for someone to explain. "Isn't that some kind of animal?"

"A predator of Sarapin," Yoda supplied gravely. "Also the nickname it is, given by students, for the seventh form of lightsaber combat."

"Hmp. I've always heard there are only six."

"Six there were, for generations of Jedi. The seventh ... is not well known. A *powerful* form it is. Deadliest of all ... But dangerous it is—to its master, as well as its opponent. Few have studied. One student alone to mastery has risen."

"But if she's the only master—and this style is so deadly—what makes you think —"

"She's not the only master, sir." He lifted his head to meet Palpatine's frown. "She is my only student to *become* a master."

"*Your* only student ..." Palpatine echoed.

"I didn't study Vaapad." Mace let his hands fall to his sides. "I created it."

Palpatine's brows drew together thoughtfully. "Yes, I seem to recall now: a reference in your report on the treason of Master Sora Bulq. Didn't you train him as well? Didn't he also claim to be a master of this Vaapad of yours?"

"Sora Bulq was not my student."

"Your ... *associate*, then?"

"And he did not master Vaapad," Mace said grimly. "Vaapad mastered him."

"Ah—ah, I see ..."

“With respect, sir, I don’t think you do.”

“I see enough to worry me, just a bit.” The warmth of Palpatine’s smile robbed insult from his words. “The relationship of Master and Padawan is intense, you said; and I well believe it. When you faced Dooku on Geonosis ...”

“I prefer,” Mace said softly, “not to talk about Geonosis, Chancellor.”

“Depa Billaba was your Padawan. And she is still perhaps your closest friend, is she not? If she must be slain, are you so certain you can strike her down?”

Mace looked at the floor, at Yoda, at the agent, and in the end he had to meet Palpatine’s eyes once more. It was not merely Palpatine of Naboo who had asked; this question had come from the Supreme Chancellor. His office demanded an answer.

“May the Force grant, sir,” Mace said slowly, “that I will not have to find out.”

REBELLION

(0–5 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

This is the period of the classic *Star Wars* movie trilogy—*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*—in which a ragtag band of Rebels battles the Empire, and Luke Skywalker learns the ways of the Force and must avoid his father's fate.

During this time, the Empire controls nearly the entire settled galaxy. Out in the Rim worlds, Imperial stormtroopers suppress uprisings with brutal efficiency, many alien species have been enslaved, and entire star systems are brutally exploited by the Empire's war machine. In the central systems, however, most citizens support the Empire, weighing misgivings about its harsh methods against the memories of the horror and chaos of the Clone Wars. Few dare to openly oppose Emperor Palpatine's rule.

But the Rebel Alliance is growing. Rebel cells strike in secret from hidden bases scattered among the stars, encouraging some of the braver Senators to speak out against the Empire. When the Rebels learn that the Empire is building the Death Star, a space station with enough firepower to destroy entire planets, Princess Leia Organa, who represents her homeworld, Alderaan, in the Senate and is secretly a high-ranking member of the Rebel Alliance, receives the plans for the battle station and flees in search of the exiled Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Thus begin the events that lead her to meet the smuggler and soon-to-be hero Han Solo, to discover her long-lost brother, Luke Skywalker, and to help the Rebellion take down the Emperor and restore democracy to the galaxy: the events of the three films *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*.

If you're a reader looking for places to jump in and explore the Rebellion-era novels, here are five great places to start:

- *Death Star*, by Michael Reaves and Steve Perry: The story of the construction of the massive battle station, touching on the lives of the builders, planners, soldiers, and support staff who populate the monstrous vessel, as well as the masterminds behind the design and those who intend to make use of it: the Emperor and Darth Vader.
- *The Mandalorian Armor*, by K. W. Jeter: The famous bounty hunter Boba Fett stars in a twisty tale of betrayal within the galactic underworld, highlighted by a riveting confrontation between bounty hunters and a band of Hutts.
- *Shadows of the Empire*, by Steve Perry: A tale of the shadowy parts of the Empire and an underworld criminal mastermind who is out to kill Luke Skywalker, while our other heroes try to figure out how to rescue Han Solo, who has been frozen in carbonite for delivery to Jabba the Hutt.
- *Tales of the Bounty Hunters*, edited by Kevin J. Anderson: The bounty hunters summoned by Darth Vader to capture the *Millennium Falcon* tell their stories in this anthology of short tales, culminating with Daniel Keys Moran's elegiac "The Last One Standing."
- *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*, by Matthew Stover: A tale set

shortly after the events of *Return of the Jedi*, in which Luke must defeat the flamboyant dark sider known as Lord Shadowspawn while the pilots of Rogue Squadron duel his servants amid tumbling asteroids.

Read on for an excerpt from a *Star Wars* novel set in the Rebellion era.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

STAR WARS

DEATH STAR

MICHAEL REAVES and STEVE PERRY

FLIGHT DECK, *IMPERIAL*-CLASS STAR DESTROYER *STEEL TALON*, POLAR ORBIT,
PLANET DESPAYRE, HORUZ SYSTEM, ATRIVIS SECTOR, OUTER RIM
TERRITORIES

The alert siren screamed, a piercing wail that couldn't be ignored by any

being on board with ears and a pulse. It had one thing to say, and it said it loud and clear:

Scramble!

Lieutenant Commander Villian "Vil" Dance came out of a deep sleep at the blaring alarm, sat up, and leapt from his rack to the expanded metal deck of the Ready Room quarters. Save for the helmet, he already wore his space suit, one of the first things an on-call TIE pilot learned to do was sleep in full battle gear. He ran for the door, half a step ahead of the next pilot to awaken. He grabbed his headgear, darted into the hall and turned to the right, then sprinted for the launching bay.

It could be a drill; there had been plenty of those lately to keep the pilots on their toes. But maybe this time it wasn't. One could always hope.

Vil ran into the assembly area. A-grav on the flight deck was kept at slightly below one g, so that the pilots, all of whom were human or humanoid, could move a little faster and get to their stations a little sooner. The smell of launch lube was acrid in the cold air, and the pulsing lights painted the area in bright, primary flashes. Techs scrambled, getting the TIE fighters to final-set for takeoff, while pilots ran toward the craft. Vil noticed that it was just his squad being scrambled. Must not be a big problem, whatever it was.

Command always said it didn't matter which unit you got. TIE fighters were all the same, down to the last nut and bolt, but even so, every pilot had his or her favorite ship. You weren't supposed to personalize them, of course, but there were ways to tell—a scratch here, a scuff mark there ... after a while, you got to where you knew which fighter was which. And no matter what Command said, some were better than others—a little faster, a little tighter in the turns, the laser cannons a hair quicker to fire when you touched the stud. Vil happened to know that his assigned ship this rotation was Black-11, one of his favorites. Maybe it was pure superstition, but he breathed just a little easier, knowing that particular craft had his name on it this time around.

The command officer on deck, Captain Rax Exeter, waved Vil over.

"Cap, what's up? Another drill?"

"Negative, Lieutenant. A group of prisoners somehow managed to take over one of the new *Lambda*-class shuttles. They're trying to get far enough away to make the jump to hyperspace. That isn't going to happen on my watch. The ID codes and tracking will be in your fighter's computer. Don't let 'em get away, son."

"No, sir. What about the crew?" Vil knew the new shuttles carried only a pilot and

copilot.

“Assumed dead. These are bad guys doing this, Dance—traitors and murderers. That’s reason enough to cook them, but we do *not* want them getting away to tell anybody what the Empire is doing out here, do we?”

“No, sir!”

“Go, Lieutenant, go!”

Vil nodded, not bothering to salute, then turned and ran. As he did, he put his helmet on and locked it into place. The hiss of air into his face was metallic and cool as the suit’s system went online. It felt very comforting. The vac suit’s extreme-temp-resistant weave of durasteel and plastoid, along with the polarizing densecris helmet, were the only things that would protect him from hard vacuum. Suit failure could make a strong man lose consciousness in under ten seconds, and die in under a minute. He’d seen it happen.

TIE fighters, in order to save mass, had no defensive shield generators, no hyperdrive capability, and no emergency life-support systems. They were thus fragile, but fast, and that was fine with Vil. He’d rather dodge enemy fire than hope it would bounce off. There was no skill in piloting some lumbering chunk of durasteel; might as well be sitting with your feet up at a turbolaser console back on the ship. Where was the fun in that?

The TIE tech had the hatch up on Black-11 as Vil arrived at the gantry above the ship. It was the work of an instant to clamber down and into the fighter’s snug cockpit.

The hatch came down and hissed shut. Vil touched the power-up stud, and the inside of the TIE—named for the twin ion engines that drove it—lit up. He scanned the controls with a quick and experienced eye. All systems were green.

The tech raised his hand in question. Vil waved back. “Go!”

“Copy that, ST-One-One. Prepare for insertion.”

Vil felt his lips twitch in annoyance. The Empire was determined to erase all signs of individuality in its pilots, on the absurd theory that nameless, faceless operators were somehow more effective. Thus the classification numbers, the anonymous flight suits and helmets, and the random rotation of spacecraft. The standardizing approach had worked reasonably well in the Clone Wars, but there was one important difference here: neither Vil nor any other TIE pilot that he knew of was a clone. None of the members of Alpha Squad had any intention of being reduced to automata. If that was what the Empire really wanted, let them use droid pilots and see how well that worked.

His musing was interrupted by the small jolt of the cycling rack below the gantry kicking on. Vil’s ship began to move toward the launching bay door. He saw the tech slip his own helmet on and lock it down.

Already the bay pumps were working full blast, depressurizing the area. By the time the launch doors were open, the air would be cycled. Vil took a deep breath, readying himself for the heavy hand of g-force that would push him back into the seat when the engines hurled him forward.

Launch Control’s voice crackled in his headphones. “Alpha Squad Leader, stand by for launch.”

“Copy,” Vil said. The launch doors pulled back with tantalizing slowness, the hydraulic *thrum* of their movement made audible by conduction through the floor and Black-11’s frame.

“You are go for launch in five, four, three, two ... go!”

Outside the confines of the Star Destroyer, the vastness of space enveloped Lieutenant Vil Dance as the ion engines pushed the TIE past the last stray wisps of frozen air and into the infinite dark. He grinned. He always did. He couldn’t help it.

Back where I belong ...

The flat blackness of space surrounded him. Behind him, he knew, the *Steel Talon* was seemingly shrinking as they pulled away from it. “Down” and to port was the curvature of the prison planet. Though they were in polar orbit, Despayre’s axial tilt showed more of the night side than day. The dark hemisphere was mostly unrelieved blackness, with a few lonely lights here and there.

Vil flicked his comm—though it came on automatically at launch, a good pilot always toggled it, just to be sure. “Alpha Squad, pyramid formation on me as soon as you are clear,” he said. “Go to tactical channel five, that’s tac-fiver, and log in.”

Vil switched his own comm channel to five. It was a lower-powered band with a shorter range, but that was the point—you didn’t want the enemy overhearing you. And in some cases, it wasn’t a good idea for the comm officer monitoring you back on the base ship to be privy to conversations, either. They tended to be a bit more informal than the Empire liked.

There came a chorus of “Copy, Alpha Leader!” from the other eleven pilots in his squad as they switched over to the new channel.

It took only a few seconds for the last fighter to launch, and only a few more for the squad to form behind Vil.

“What’s the drill, Vil?” That from Benjo, aka ST-1-2, his second in command and right panelman.

“Alpha Squadron, we have a *Lambda*-class shuttle captured by prisoners. They are running for hyper. Either they give up and come back, or we dust ‘em.”

“*Lambda*-class? That’s one of the new ones, right? They have any guns?”

Vil sighed. That was Raar Anyell, a Corellian like Vil himself, but not somebody you’d want to hold up as a prime example of the human species. “Don’t you bother to read the boards at all, Anyell?”

“I was just about to do that, sir, when the alarm went off. Was looking right at ‘em. Had the latest notices right in my hand. Sir.”

The other pilots laughed, and even Vil had to grin. Anyell was a foul-up everywhere except in the cockpit, but he was a good enough pilot that Vil was willing to give him some slice.

His sensor screen pinged, giving him an image of their quarry. He altered course to intercept.

“Anybody else behind on his homework, listen up,” he said. “The *Lambda*-class shuttle is twenty meters long, has a top speed of fourteen hundred g, a Class-One hyperdrive, and can carry twenty troops in full battle gear—probably a couple more convicts in civvies.

“The ship carries three double-blaster cannons and two double-laser cannons. It can’t accelerate worth a wheep and it turns slower than a comet, but if you get in its sights, it *can* blow you to itty-bitty pieces. It would be embarrassing to have to inform your family you got shot apart by a shuttle, so stay alert.”

There came another chorus of acknowledgments:

“Copy, sir.”

“Yes, sir!”

“No sweat.”

“Anyell, I didn’t hear *your* response.”

“Oh, sorry, sir, I was taking a little nap. What was the question?”

Before the squad commander could reply, the shuttle suddenly loomed ahead. It was running as silently as possible, with no lights, but as its orbit brought it across the terminator and out of Despayre’s night side, the sunlight struck rays from its hull.

“There is our target, four kilometers dead ahead. I want a fast flyby so they can see us, and then I want a fountain pattern dispersal and loop, two clicks minimum distance and bracket, one, four, four, and two, you know who you are. I’ll move in

close and have a word with whoever they have flying the stolen spacecraft.”

Benjo: “Aw, Lieutenant, come on, let us have a shot, too.”

“Negative. If you had a clue about the vessel, I might, but since you’re just as likely to shoot each other as the quarry, you’ll hold the bracket.”

More acknowledgments, but without much enthusiasm. He couldn’t blame his squad—they hadn’t had any action except drills since they’d been assigned to this project—but his secondary goal was to bring all his men back alive. The primary, of course, was to accomplish their mission. He didn’t need a squad for this; any fighter pilot worth his spit should be able to deal with a lumbering shuttle, even one with the new-vehicle smell still in it. The Lambda’s delta vee wasn’t all that efficient, but with constant drive it could get above the solar plane and far enough out of the planet’s gravity well to engage its hyperdrive fairly soon—and once it was in the chute, they’d never find it.

But that wasn’t going to happen.

The pyramid-shaped formation zipped past the fleeing shuttle, close enough for Vil to see the pilot sitting in the command seat. He didn’t look surprised, of course—he would have seen them coming on the sensors. But he couldn’t outrun them, couldn’t dodge, and no way could he take out a full squad of TIE fighters even if he was the best gunner who’d ever lived, not in that boat. And anyway, Vil wasn’t going to give him the opportunity to try.

The squad flowered into the dispersal maneuver as ordered, looping out and away to their assigned positions, angled pressor beams in their arrays providing maneuverability. Vil pulled a high-g tight turn and came around to parallel the shuttle a few hundred meters away, slightly above it. He watched the wing turrets closely. As soon as they started to track him, he jinked to port, then to starboard, slowed, then sped up. They tried to keep up with him, but they were a hair too slow.

Vil toggled to a wide-band channel. They’d hear this back in the Destroyer, he knew.

“Attention, shuttle RLH-One. Turn the craft around and proceed immediately to Star Destroyer *Steel Talon*’s tractor beam range.”

There was no answer; nothing but the slight hiss of the carrier.

“Shuttle craft, do you copy my transmission?”

Another pause. Then: “Yeah, we hear you, rocketjock. We aren’t of a mind to do that.”

Vil looked at his control panel. They were two minutes away from Minimum Safe Distance—the point far enough from Despayre where they could safely attempt the jump to lightspeed. Jump too close to a planet’s gravity well and the shift would tear the vessel apart. If the guy he was talking to had enough skill to fly the shuttle, he’d know that. His control panel would tell him when he reached MSD, and then it would be over. Lieutenant Dance would have failed a mission, for the first time.

Never happen, he thought. “Turn it around, or we *will* fire,” he said.

“You’d do that? Just blow us apart? Essentially murder fifteen men—and two women? One of them is old enough to be your granny. You can live with that?”

He was stalling for time, Vil knew. The beings on that shuttle were bad enough to have been sent to the galaxy’s number one prison planet, and the Imperial courts didn’t bother to do that with petty thieves or traffic violators. His granny hadn’t robbed any banks or killed anybody. Not that he knew of, anyway.

“Shuttle pilot, I say again—”

Vil saw the port turret on the shuttle open up. He cut across the craft’s flight path, angling away aft as the starboard gun began firing. He hit his thrusters full, coming up in a half loop and twisting away from the incoming laserfire.

Even a good gunner couldn’t have spiked him at this angle, and these guys weren’t anywhere close to good enough. Still, the pulsed incandescent beams came close.

“Lieutenant—!” That from Benjo.

“Hold your position, Alpha Squad, there’s no problem here.” Cool and calm. Like discussing what they might be having for dinner.

He zipped Black-11 out of range.

The clock was running down. Less than a minute to MSD.

“Last chance, shuttle. Turn it around. *Now.*”

In answer, the pilot pulled the shuttle toward so his gunners could get a better angle. They started shooting again.

The shots were wild, but there was always a chance a stray beam could hit you, even by accident. And wouldn’t that be a glorious end to an unblemished career? To be killed by a convict on a milking shuttle?

Enough of this. Vil hit the drive controls and damped the thrust to zero. Then he pushed the throttles to full, angled to port and topside, did a roll and loop, and came around, driving at the shuttle amidships.

He pressed the fire-control button.

Black-11 spat twin laser bolts from the low-temp tips—*blip-blip, blip-blip, blip-blip*—

Vil Dance was a better-than-average shooter. The bolts ripped into the shuttle, chewed it up, and as he overflew and peeled away to starboard-downside, the *Lambda* blew apart, shattering into at least half a dozen large pieces and hundreds of smaller ones amid a cloud of flash-frozen air, liquid, and debris.

And pinwheeling bodies.

Vil switched back to tac-five. “Anyell, Lude, move in and check for survivors.” He kept his voice calm, emotionless, no big deal. His pulse was racing, but they didn’t have to know that. Let them think his heart pumped liquid oxy.

“None of ’em were wearing suits, Lieutenant,” Lude said a moment later. “No survivors. Too bad about that brand-new ship.”

“Good hit, Vil,” Benjo said. “Congratulations.”

Vil felt a warm glow of satisfaction. It had been a good hit. And they had been firing at him, so it wasn’t like shooting yorks in a canister. It had been a righteous response.

He switched back to the main op-chan. “Fighter Control, this is ST-One-One, Lieutenant Vil Dance of TIE fighter Alpha Squadron. Mission accomplished. You might want to send out a recovery vessel to pick up the pieces.”

“Copy, ST-One-One,” said Captain Exeter. “Good job.”

“Thank you, sir. Let’s return to base, Alpha Squad.”

Vil smiled as he waited for his team to form up again. This was the best job in the galaxy, being a fighter pilot. He couldn’t imagine a better one. He was young, not even twenty-five yet, and already a legend among his peers—and among the ladies as well. Life was good.

As they started for the Destroyer, Vil saw in the distance the frame of the gigantic battle station that was being built in planetary orbit. They were a hundred kilometers away from the structure, and it was still skeletal, its interior construction only just begun, but even so, it looked impossibly huge at this distance. It was to be the size of a small moon when it was finished, dwarfing the largest Star Destroyer.

Incredible to think about. And if he kept racking up missions like the one just completed, there was a very good chance that he would be assigned as unit commander on board the new station.

He led his squad back to the equatorial launching bay. Looking at the awe-inspiring base, he felt a surge of pride in the Empire, and a feeling of gratitude at being a part of the Tarkin Doctrine’s glorious mission. There was no official appellation or designation, other than *battle station*, that he knew of for the Grand Moff’s vision, but there was a name for it that everybody he knew, officers and enlisted alike, used.

They called it the Death Star.

THE NEW REPUBLIC

(5–25 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

The destruction of the second Death Star and the death of Emperor Palpatine—the climactic conclusion of *Return of the Jedi*—has shaken the Empire to its core. While the remnant of the loyal Imperials settles in for a long, drawn-out last stand, the victorious Rebel Alliance and its supporters found a galactic governing authority they name the New Republic. Troops and warships are donated to the cause, as New Republic military leaders forge plans to seize Imperial fortress worlds, invade the Core Worlds, and retake Coruscant itself. Eventually, the Imperial Remnant is pushed back to a small part of the Outer Rim, and the New Republic is finally able to focus on restoring just and democratic government to the galaxy.

At last the heroes of the Rebellion are free to pursue their own lives. Han and Leia marry ... but before the birth of their twins, Jacen and Jaina, the galaxy is once again torn asunder by war, as the Imperial forces—under the control of military mastermind Grand Admiral Thrawn—step up their campaign of raids against the New Republic. Even after Thrawn is defeated, the Imperial forces forge on, harrying the New Republic and Luke’s nascent Jedi academy—the start of Luke’s dream to rebuild the Jedi Order from the ground up. Plagues, insurrections, and rogue warlords add to the chaos and push the New Republic back a step for every two steps it takes forward in its quest for peace and prosperity for all. Meanwhile, Leia becomes Chief of State of the New Republic, and the Solos’ third child, a boy they name Anakin, after his grandfather, is born; Luke has met Mara Jade, a secret dark side apprentice to the Emperor whom he helps bring into the light, and the two subsequently fall in love and marry.

Finally, after a series of further setbacks and plots against the young galactic government and Luke’s Jedi, a peace treaty formally ends the long conflict between the New Republic and the remnants of the Empire. The events of these years are the answer to the question ... “What happened after the movies?”

If you’re a reader looking to dive into the New Republic era, here are three great starting points:

- *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron*, by Michael A. Stackpole: A taste of life at the edge, *Rogue Squadron* and the subsequent X-Wing novels bring to life Wedge Antilles and his brave, sometimes rambunctious fellow pilots in fast-paced adventures that switch smoothly and easily between entertaining repartee and tense battlefield action.
- *Heir to the Empire*, by Timothy Zahn: The book that reintroduced a generation of fans to *Star Wars* is full of the elements that made the movies great—space battles, intriguing villains, and derring-do.
- *Before the Storm*, by Michael P. Kube-McDowell: With a harder sci-fi edge to *Star Wars*, this novel features the classic heroes Han, Luke, and Leia, and explores everything from military forensics to the nature of the Force.

Read on for an excerpt from a *Star Wars* novel set in the New Republic era.

BOOK 1 IN THE EXCITING NEW SERIES!

STAR WARS

X-WING ROGUE SQUADRON

MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

You're good, Corran, but you're no Luke Skywalker. Corran Horn's cheeks still burned at the memory of Commander Antilles's evaluation of his last simulator exercise. The line had been a simple comment, not meant to be cruel nor delivered that way, but it cut deep into Corran. *I've never tried to suggest I'm that good of a pilot.*

He shook his head. *No, you just wanted it to be self-evident and easily recognized by everyone around you.* Reaching out he flicked the starter switches for the X-wing simulator's engines. "Green One has four starts and is go." All around him in the cockpit various switches, buttons, and monitors flashed to life. "Primary and secondary power is at full."

Ooryl Qrygg, his Gand wingman, reported similar start-up success in a high-pitched voice. "Green Two is operational."

Green Three and Four checked in, then the external screens came alive projecting an empty starfield. "Whistler, have you finished the navigation calculations?"

The green and white R2 unit seated behind Corran hooted, then the navdata spilled out over Corran's main monitor. He punched a button sending the same coordinates out to the other pilots in Green Flight. "Go to light speed and rendezvous on the *Redemption*."

As Corran engaged the X-wing's hyperdrive, the stars elongated themselves into white cylinders, then snapped back into pinpoints and began to revolve slowly, transforming themselves into a tunnel of white light. Corran fought the urge to use the stick to compensate for the roll. In space, and especially hyperspace, up and down were relative. How his ship moved through hyperspace didn't really matter—as long as it remained on the course Whistler had calculated and had attained sufficient velocity before entering hyperspace, he'd arrive intact.

Flying into a black hole would actually make this run easier. Every pilot dreaded the *Redemption* run. The scenario was based on an Imperial attack on evacuation ships back before the first Death Star had been destroyed. While the *Redemption* waited for three Medevac shuttles and the corvette *Korolev* to dock and off-load wounded, the Imperial frigate *Warspite* danced around the system and dumped out TIE fighters and added bombers to the mix to do as much damage as they could.

The bombers, with a full load of missiles, could do a lot of damage. All the pilots called the *Redemption* scenario by another name: the *Requiem* scenario. The *Warspite* would only deploy four starfighters and a half-dozen bombers—known in pilot slang as "eyeballs" and "dupes" respectively—but it would do so in a pattern that made it all but impossible for the pilots to save the *Korolev*. The corvette was just one big target, and the TIE bombers had no trouble unloading all their missiles into it.

Stellar pinpoints elongated again as the fighter came out of hyperspace. Off to the port side Corran saw the *Redemption*. Moments later Whistler reported that the other fighters and all three Medevac shuttles had arrived. The fighters checked in and the first shuttle began its docking maneuver with the *Redemption*.

"Green One, this is Green Four."

"Go ahead, Four."

"By the book, or are we doing something fancy?"

Corran hesitated before answering. By book, Nawara Ven had referred to the general wisdom about the scenario. It stated that one pilot should play *fleethund* and

race out to engage the first TIE flight while the other three fighters remained in close as backup. As long as three fighters stayed at home, it appeared, the *Warspite* dropped ships off at a considerable distance from the *Korolev*. When they didn't, it got bolder and the whole scenario became very bloody.

The problem with going by the book was that it wasn't a very good strategy. It meant one pilot had to deal with five TIEs—two eyeballs and three dupes—all by himself, then turn around and engage five more. Even with them coming in waves, the chances of being able to succeed against those odds were slim.

Doing it any other way was disastrous. *Besides, what loyal son of Corellia ever had any use for odds?*

"By the book. Keep the home fires burning and pick up after me."

"Done. Good luck."

"Thanks." Corran reached up with his right hand and pressed it against the lucky charm he wore on a chain around his neck. Though he could barely feel the coin through his gloves and the thick material of his flight suit, the familiar sensation of the metal resting against his breastbone brought a smile to his face. *It worked for you a lot, Dad, let's hope all its luck hasn't run out yet.*

He openly acknowledged that he'd been depending quite a bit on luck to see him through the difficulties of settling in with the Alliance forces. Learning the slang took some work—moving from calling TIE starfighters "eyeballs" to calling Interceptors "squints" made a certain amount of sense, but many other terms had been born of logic that escaped him. Everything about the Rebellion seemed odd in comparison to his previous life and fitting in had not been easy.

Nor will be winning this scenario.

The *Korolev* materialized and moved toward the *Redemption*, prompting Corran to begin his final check. He'd mulled the scenario over in his mind time and time again. In previous runs, when he served as a home guard to someone else's *fleethund*, he'd had Whistler record traces on the TIE timing patterns, flight styles, and attack vectors. While different cadets flew the TIE half of the simulations, the craft dictated their performance and a lot of their initial run sequence had been preprogrammed.

A sharp squawk from Whistler alerted Corran to the *Warspite's* arrival. "Great, eleven clicks aft." Pulling the stick around to the right, Corran brought the X-wing into a wide turn. At the end of it he punched the throttle up to full power. Hitting another switch up to the right, he locked the S-foils into attack position. "Green One engaging."

Rhysati's voice came cool and strong through the radio. "Be all over them like drool on a Hutt."

"I'll do my best, Green Three." Corran smiled and waggled the X-wing as he flew back through the Alliance formation and out toward the *Warspite*. Whistler announced the appearance of three TIE bombers with a low tone, then brought the sound up as two TIE fighters joined them.

"Whistler, tag the bombers as targets one, two, and three." As the R2 unit complied with that order, Corran pushed shield power full to front and brought his laser targeting program up on the main monitor. With his left hand he adjusted the sighting calibration knob on the stick and got the two fighters. *Good, looks like three clicks between the eyeballs and the bombers.*

Corran's right hand again brushed the coin beneath his flight suit. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, then settled his hand on the stick and let his thumb hover over the firing button. At two clicks the heads-up display painted a yellow box around the lead TIE fighter. The box went green as the fighter's image locked into the HUD's targeting cross and Whistler's shrill bleat filled the cockpit. Corran's thumb hit the button, sending three bursts of laser bolts at the lead fighter.

The first set missed but the second and third blasted through the spherical cockpit.

The hexagonal solar panels snapped off and spun forward through space while the ion engines exploded into an expanding ball of incandescent gas.

Corran kicked the X-wing up in a ninety-degree snap-roll and sliced through the center of the explosion. Laser fire from the second fighter lit up his forward shields, making it impossible for him to get a good visual line on the TIE. Whistler yowled, complaining about being a target. Corran hurried a shot and knew he hit, but the TIE flashed past and continued on in at the *Korolev*.

Time to write a new chapter for the book on the Requiem scenario. Corran throttled back almost all the way to zero and let the X-wing decelerate. “Whistler, bring up target one.”

The image of the first TIE bomber filled his monitor. Corran switched over to proton torpedo target control. The HUD changed to a larger box and Whistler began beeping as he worked supplying data to the targeting computer for a missile lock.

“Green One, your velocity is down to one percent. Do you need help?”

“Negative, Green Two.”

“Corran, what are you doing?”

“Making the *book* a short story.” *I hope.*

The HUD went red and Whistler’s tone became constant. Corran punched the button and launched the first missile. “Acquire target two.” The HUD flashed yellow, then red, and the pilot launched the second missile.

Numbers scrolled away to zero as the missiles streaked in at their targets. Two kilometers away the first missile hit, shredding the first TIE bomber. Seconds later the second missile hit its target. A novalike explosion lit the simulator’s cockpit, then melted into the blackness of space.

“Acquire target three.”

Even as he gave the order he knew the rate of closure between the bomber and his ship would make the last missile shot all but impossible. “Cancel three.” Corran throttled up again as the third bomber sailed past and brought his ship around. He switched back to laser targeting and climbed right up on the bomber’s stern.

The dupe’s pilot tried to evade him. He juked the double-hulled ship to the left, then started a long turn to the right, but Corran was of no mind to lose him. He cut his speed, which kept the bomber in front of him, then followed it in its turn. As he leveled out again on its tail, he triggered two laser bursts and the targeting computer reported hull damage.

The bomber’s right wing came up in a roll and Corran did the same thing. Had he continued to fly level, the X-wing’s lasers would have passed on either side of the bomber’s fuselage, giving the bomber a few seconds more of life. Keeping the bomber centered in his crosshairs, Corran hit twice more and the bulky craft disintegrated before him.

Pushing his throttle to full, Corran scanned for the fighter he’d missed. He found it two clicks out and going in toward the *Korolev*. He also found five more TIEs coming in from the other side of the corvette, eighteen kilometers away. *Damn, the bomber took more time than I had to give it.*

He brought the torpedo targeting program back up and locked on to the remaining fighter. The HUD seemed to take forever before it went red and acquired a lock. Corran fired a missile and watched it blast through the fighter, then turned his attention to the new TIEs.

“Green One, do you want us to engage?”

Corran shook his head. “Negative, Two. *Warspite* is still here and could dump another flight.” He sighed. “Move to intercept the fighters, but don’t go beyond a click from the *Korolev*.”

“On it.”

Good, they can tie the fighters up while I dust these dupes. Corran studied the

navigational data Whistler was giving him. The *Korolev*, the bombers, and his X-wing formed a shrinking triangle. If he flew directly at the bombers he would end up flying in an arc, which would take more time than he had and let them get close enough to launch their missiles at the corvette. That would be less than useless as far as he was concerned.

"Whistler, plot me an intercept point six clicks out from the *Korolev*."

The R2 whistled blithely, as if that calculation was so simple even Corran should have been able to do it in his head. Steering toward it, Corran saw he'd have just over a minute to deal with the bombers before they were in firing range on the *Korolev*. *Not enough time.*

Flicking two switches, Corran redirected generator energy from recharging his shields and lasers into the engines. It took the acceleration compensator a second to cycle up, so the ship's burst of speed pushed Corran back into the padding of his command seat. *This better work.*

"Green One, the *Warspite* has hyped. Are we released to engage fighters?"

"Affirmative, Three. Go get them." Corran frowned for a second, knowing his fellow pilots would make short work of the TIE fighters. They would deny him a clean sweep, but he'd willingly trade two TIEs for the corvette. *Commander Antilles might have gotten them all himself, but then he's got two Death Stars painted on the side of his X-wing.*

"Whistler, mark each of the bombers four, five, and six." Range to intercept was three clicks and he had added thirty seconds to his fighting time. "Acquire four."

The targeting computer showed him to be coming in at a forty-five-degree angle to the flight path of his target, which meant he was way off target. He quickly punched the generator back into recharging lasers and his shields, then pulled even more energy from his quartet of Incom 4L4 fusial thrust engines and shunted it into recharging his weapons and shields.

The resource redirection brought his speed down. Corran pulled back on the stick, easing the X-wing into a turn that brought him head-on into the bombers. Tapping the stick to the left, he centered the targeting box on the first of the dupes.

The HUD started yellow, then quickly went red. Corran fired a missile. "Acquire five." The HUD started red and Whistler's keen echoed through the cockpit. The Corellian fired a second missile. "Acquire six."

Whistler screeched.

Corran looked down at his display. Scrolling up the screen, sandwiched between the reports of missile hits on the three bombers, he saw a notation about Green Two. "Green Two, report."

"He's gone, One."

"A fighter got him?"

"No time to chat ..." The comm call from the Twi'lek in Green Four ended in a hiss of static.

"Rhysati?"

"Got one, Corran, but this last one is good."

"Hang on."

"I'll do my best."

"Whistler, acquire six."

The R2 unit hissed. The last bomber had already shot past the intercept point and was bearing in on the *Korolev*. The pilot had the wide-bodied craft slowly spinning, making it a difficult target for a missile lock. The *Korolev*, being as big as it was, would present large enough of a target that even a rolling ship could get a lock on it.

And once he has that lock, the Korolev is so much space junk. Corran switched back to lasers and pushed his X-wing forward. Even though two clicks separated them, he triggered a couple of laser blasts. He knew his chances of hitting were not good at

that range, but the light from the bolts would shoot past the TIE and give the pilot something to think about. *And I want him thinking about me, not that nerf-vette grazing there.*

Corran redirected all power back into the engines and shot forward. Two more laser blasts caused the TIE bomber to shy a bit, but it had pushed into target-acquisition range. The ship's roll began to slow as the pilot fixated on his target, then, as Corran brought his lasers to bear, the bomber jinked and cut away to port.

The Corellian's eyes narrowed. *Bror Jace has got to be flying that thing. He thinks it's payback time.* The other pilot, a human from Thyferra, was—in Corran's opinion—the *second best* pilot in the training squadron. *He's going to kill the Korolev and I'll never hear the end of it. Unless ...*

Corran pulled all his shield energy forward and left his aft as naked as the shieldless TIE bomber. Following Jace through a barrel roll, he kept the throttle full forward. As they leveled out again Corran triggered a snapshot at the bomber. It caught a piece of one wing, but Jace dove beneath the X-wing's line of fire. *Here we go!*

Corran shoved his stick forward to follow the bomber's dive, but because his rate of speed was a good twenty percent faster than that of Jace's ship, the X-wing moved into a broad loop. By the time Corran inverted to finish the turn off, Jace's bomber came back up and banked in on the X-wing's tail.

Before the bomber could unload a missile or two into his aft, Corran broke the fighter hard to port and carved across the bomber's line of fire. *Basic maneuver with a basic response.* Without even glancing at his instruments, and paying no attention to Whistler's squealed warning, Corran cut engine power back into recharging his shields. *One more second.*

Jace's response to Corran's break had been a reverse-throttle hop. By bringing the nose of the bomber up in a steep climb, then rolling out in the direction of the turn, Jace managed to stay inside the arc of the X-wing's turn. As the bomber leveled off, it closed very quickly with the X-wing—*too quickly for a missile lock, but not a laser shot.*

The TIE bomber shrieked in at the X-wing. Collision warning klaxons wailed. Corran could feel Jace's excitement as the X-wing loomed larger. He knew the other pilot would snap off a quick shot, then come around again, angry at having overshot the X-wing, but happy to smoke Corran *before* taking the *Korolev*.

The X-wing pilot hit a switch and shifted all shield power to the aft shields.

The deflector shield materialized as a demisphere approximately twenty meters behind the X-wing. Designed to dissipate both energy and kinetic weapons, it had no trouble protecting the fighter from the bomber's twin laser blasts. Had the bomber used missiles, the shields could even have handled all the damage they could do, though that would have been enough to destroy the shields themselves.

The TIE bomber, which massed far more than the missiles it carried, should have punched through the shields and might even have destroyed the fighter, but it hit at an angle and glanced off. The collision did blast away half the power of the aft shield and bounced the X-wing around, but otherwise left the snubfighter undamaged.

The same could not be said of the unshielded bomber. The impact with the shield was roughly equivalent to a vehicle hitting a ferrocrete wall at sixty kilometers per hour. While that might not do a land vehicle much damage, land vehicles are decidedly less delicate than starfighters. The starboard wing crumpled inward, wrapping itself around the bomber's cockpit. Both pods of the ship twisted out of alignment so the engines shot it off into an uncontrolled tumble through the simulator's dataspace.

"Green Three, did you copy that?"

Corran got no response. “Whistler, what happened to Three?”

The R2 unit gave him a mournful tone.

Sithspawn. Corran flipped the shield control to equalize things fore and aft. “Where is he?”

The image of a lone TIE fighter making a strafing run on the *Korolev* appeared on Corran’s monitor. The clumsy little craft skittered along over the corvette’s surface, easily dodging its weak return fire. *That’s seriously gutsy for a TIE fighter.* Corran smiled. *Or arrogant, and time to make him pay for that arrogance.*

The Corellian brought his proton torpedo targeting program up and locked on to the TIE. It tried to break the lock, but turbolaser fire from the *Korolev* boxed it in. Corran’s HUD went red and he triggered the torpedo. “Scratch one eyeball.”

The missile shot straight in at the fighter, but the pilot broke hard to port and away, causing the missile to overshoot the target. *Nice flying!* Corran brought his X-wing over and started down to loop in behind the TIE, but as he did so, the TIE vanished from his forward screen and reappeared in his aft arc. Yanking the stick hard to the right and pulling it back, Corran wrestled the X-wing up and to starboard, then inverted and rolled out to the left.

A laser shot jolted a tremor through the simulator’s couch. *Lucky thing I had all shields aft!* Corran reinforced them with energy from his lasers, then evened them out fore and aft. Jinking the fighter right and left, he avoided laser shots coming in from behind, but they all came in far closer than he liked.

He knew Jace had been in the bomber, and Jace was the only pilot in the unit who could have stayed with him. *Except for our leader.* Corran smiled broadly. *Coming to see how good I really am, Commander Antilles? Let me give you a clinic.* “Make sure you’re in there solid, Whistler, because we’re going for a little ride.”

Corran refused to let the R2’s moan slow him down. A snap-roll brought the X-wing up on its port wing. Pulling back on the stick yanked the fighter’s nose up away from the original line of flight. The TIE stayed with him, then tightened up on the arc to close distance. Corran then rolled another ninety degrees and continued the turn into a dive. Throttling back, Corran hung in the dive for three seconds, then hauled back hard on the stick and cruised up into the TIE fighter’s aft.

The X-wing’s laser fire missed wide to the right as the TIE cut to the left. Corran kicked his speed up to full and broke with the TIE. He let the X-wing rise above the plane of the break, then put the fighter through a twisting roll that ate up enough time to bring him again into the TIE’s rear. The TIE snapped to the right and Corran looped out left.

He watched the tracking display as the distance between them grew to be a kilometer and a half, then slowed. *Fine, you want to go nose to nose? I’ve got shields and you don’t.* If Commander Antilles wanted to commit virtual suicide, Corran was happy to oblige him. He tugged the stick back to his sternum and rolled out in an inversion loop. *Coming at you!*

The two starfighters closed swiftly. Corran centered his foe in the crosshairs and waited for a dead shot. Without shields the TIE fighter would die with one burst, and Corran wanted the kill to be clean. His HUD flicked green as the TIE juke in and out of the center, then locked green as they closed.

The TIE started firing at maximum range and scored hits. At that distance the lasers did no real damage against the shields, prompting Corran to wonder why Wedge was wasting the energy. Then, as the HUD’s green color started to flicker, realization dawned. *The bright bursts on the shields are a distraction to my targeting! I better kill him now!*

Corran tightened down on the trigger button, sending red laser needles stabbing out at the closing TIE fighter. He couldn’t tell if he had hit anything. Lights flashed in the cockpit and Whistler started screeching furiously. Corran’s main monitor went

black, his shields were down, and his weapons controls were dead.

The pilot looked left and right. "Where is he, Whistler?"

The monitor in front of him flickered to life and a diagnostic report began to scroll by. Bloodred bordered the damage reports. "Scanners, out; lasers, out; shields, out; engine, out! I'm a wallowing Hutt just hanging here in space."

With the X-wing's scanners being dead, the R2 droid couldn't locate the TIE fighter if it was outside the droid's scanner range. Whistler informed Corran of this with an anxious bleat.

"Easy, Whistler, get me my shields back first. Hurry." Corran continued to look around for the TIE fighter. *Letting me stew, are you, sir? You'll finish the Korolev then come for me.* The pilot frowned and felt a cold chill run down his spine. *You're right, I'm no Luke Skywalker. I'm glad you think I'm not bad, but I want to be the best!*

Suddenly the starfield went black and the simulator pod hissed as it cracked open. The canopy lifted up and the sound of laughter filled the cockpit. Corran almost flicked the blast shield down on his helmet to prevent his three friends from seeing his embarrassed blush. *Nope, might as well take my punishment.* He stood and doffed his helmet, then shook his head. "At least it's over."

The Twi'lek, Nawara Ven, clapped his hands. "Such modesty, Corran."

"Huh?"

The blond woman next to the Twi'lek beamed up at him. "You won the *Redemption* scenario."

"What?"

The grey-green Gand nodded his head and placed his helmet on the nose of Corran's simulator. "You had nine kills. Jace is not pleased."

"Thanks for the good news, Ooryl, but I still got killed in there." Corran hopped out of the simulator. "The pilot who got you three—Commander Antilles—he got me, too."

The Twi'lek shrugged. "He's been at this a bit longer than I have, so it is not a surprise he got me."

Rhysati shook her head, letting her golden hair drape down over her shoulders. "The surprise was that he took so long to get us, really. Are you certain he killed you?"

Corran frowned. "I don't think I got a mission end message."

"Clearly you have too little experience of dying in these simulators because you'd know if you did." Rhysati laughed lightly. "He may have hit you, Corran, but he didn't kill you. You survived and won."

Corran blinked, then smiled. "And I got Bror before he got the *Korolev*. I'll take that."

"As well you should." A brown-haired man with crystal blue eyes shouldered his way between Ooryl and Nawara. "You're an exceptionally good pilot."

"Thank you, sir."

The man offered Corran his hand. "Thought I had you, but when you shot out my engines, your missile caught up with me. Nice job."

Corran shook the man's hand hesitantly. The man wore a black flight suit with no name or rank insignia on it, though it did have Hoth, Endor, and Bakura battle tabs sewn on the left sleeve. "You know, you're one hot hand in a TIE."

"Nice of you to say, Mr. Horn—I'm a bit rusty, but I really enjoyed this run." He released Corran's hand. "Next time I'll give you more of a fight."

A woman wearing a Lieutenant's uniform touched the TIE pilot on the arm. "Admiral Ackbar is ready to see you now, sir. If you will follow me."

The TIE pilot nodded to the four X-wing pilots. "Good flying, all of you. Congratulations on winning the scenario."

Corran stared at the man's retreating back. "I thought Commander Antilles was in

that TIE. I mean it had to be someone as good as him to get you three.”

The ends of Nawara Ven’s head tails twitched. “Apparently he *is* that good.”

Rhysati nodded. “He flew circles around me.”

“At least you saw him.” The Gand drummed his trio of fingers against the hull of Corran’s simulator. “He caught Ooryl as Ooryl fixed on his wingman. Ooryl is free hydrogen in simspace. That man is very good.”

“Sure, but *who* is he?” Corran frowned. “He’s not Luke Skywalker, obviously, but he was with Rogue Squadron at Bakura and survived Endor.”

The Twi’lek’s red eyes sparked. “The Endor tab had a black dot in the middle—he survived the Death Star run.”

Rhysati looped her right arm around Corran’s neck and brought her fist up gently under his chin. “What difference does it make who he is?”

“Rhys, he shot up three of our best pilots, had me dead in space, and says he’s a bit *rusty*! I want to know who he is because he’s decidedly dangerous.”

“He is that, but today he’s not the *most* dangerous pilot. That’s you.” She linked her other arm through Nawara’s right elbow. “So, Corran, you forget you were a Security officer and, Nawara, you forget you were a lawyer and let this thing drop. Today we’re all pilots, we’re all on the same side”—she smiled sweetly—“and the man who beat the *Redemption* scenario is about to make good on all those dinner and drink promises he made to talk his wingmates into helping him win.”

THE NEW JEDI ORDER

(25–40 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

A quarter century after *A New Hope* and the destruction of the Death Star, the galaxy is free of wide-scale conflicts—but the New Republic must contend with many regional brushfires. And Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order faces its own growing pains: Some New Republic officials want to rein in the Jedi, leading Luke to wonder if the Jedi Council should be restored.

On the planet Rhommamool, Leia Organa Solo, Mara Jade Skywalker, and Jaina Solo meet with a mysterious rabble-rouser named Nom Anor. Anor rejects Leia's diplomatic entreaties, but she's more disturbed by what she finds when she reaches out to him in the Force: nothing. It's as if he isn't there.

Anor is a secret agent of the Yuuzhan Vong, powerful warriors from another galaxy who regard technology as blasphemous, relying on biological constructs to serve as their starships, weapons, and communicators. Long ago, a devastating war destroyed much of the Yuuzhan Vong's galaxy and cut them off from the Force, sending their clans across the intergalactic void in search of a new home. Now they are at the edge of the *Star Wars* galaxy, ready to invade.

As head of the New Jedi Order, Luke is central to the galaxy's defense; Leia's skills as a former Chief of State and respected political adviser are also called on. The five-year war shakes the galaxy to its foundations. Technologically advanced worlds within the Yuuzhan Vong invasion corridor are subjected to the newcomers' biotechnology and altered into strange hybrids combining what they had been with the new Yuuzhan Vong ecosystem. Entire species are enslaved—or eradicated. The New Republic is ill prepared to meet the extragalactic threat, with regional rivalries, political dissension, and concern over the Imperial Remnant limiting the effectiveness of its military response. Wrangling in the Senate snarls the war plans, as do disagreements between planetary fleets and armies, while assassination and war thin the ranks of the New Republic's leaders. Officers and pilots who battled for so long against the Empire, such as Admiral Ackbar and Wedge Antilles, work feverishly to figure out how to outmaneuver their new enemies.

The invasion sorely challenges the Jedi, as well. Some take it upon themselves to meet the Yuuzhan Vong threat head-on, disdaining foot-dragging by politicians—and some of those skirt the dark side of the Force, giving in to their anger and fear as the Yuuzhan Vong ruin worlds and lives. The Yuuzhan Vong come to recognize the Jedi as the biggest threat to their plans, and begin hunting them down using New Republic traitors and bioengineered killers. At the forefront of the war against the Jedi are the Solo children—now teenagers and Jedi Knights in their own right. By the time the war is over, the Solo family will never be the same again.

The other heroes of the Rebellion, too, face personal struggles and tragedies. Luke fears for the life of his wife, Mara—infected with a Yuuzhan Vong-engineered disease—and for that of his newborn son, Ben, hunted by the Jedi's enemies. Han and Leia's losses are even harder to bear, as their oldest friends and children risk everything to stop the Yuuzhan Vong.

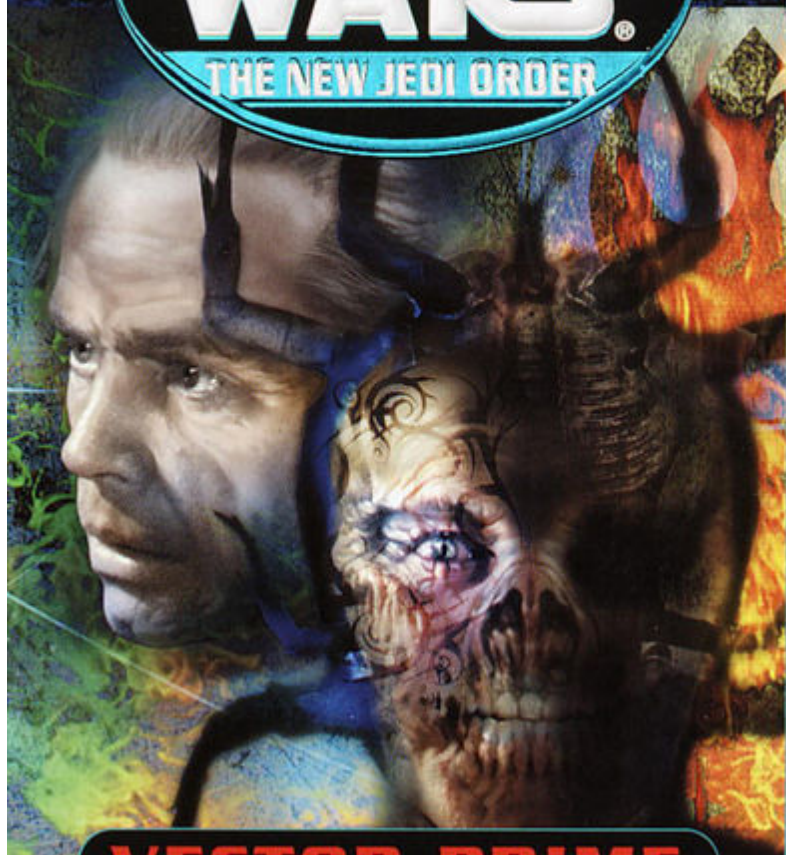
If you're a reader looking to explore the epic tale of the Yuuzhan Vong war and the

era of Luke's New Jedi Order, the best place to start is with the first book in the series:

- *The New Jedi Order: Vector Prime*, by R. A. Salvatore: The first novel in the series introduces the pitiless Yuuzhan Vong and immediately makes clear that the heroes of the Rebellion are in mortal danger.

Read on for an excerpt from a *Star Wars* novel set in the New Jedi Order era.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



VECTOR PRIME

R. A. SALVATORE

ONE

Fraying Fabric

It was too peaceful out here, surrounded by the vacuum of space and with only the continual hum of the twin ion drives breaking the silence. While she loved these moments of peace, Leia Organa Solo also viewed them as an emotional trap, for she had been around long enough to understand the turmoil she would find at the end of this ride.

Like the end of every ride, lately.

Leia paused a moment before she entered the bridge of the *Jade Sabre*, the new shuttle her brother, Luke, had built for his wife, Mara Jade. Before her, and apparently oblivious to her, Mara and Jaina sat comfortably, side by side at the controls, talking and smiling. Leia focused on her daughter, Jaina, sixteen years old, but with the mature and calm demeanor of a veteran pilot. Jaina looked a lot like Leia, with long dark hair and brown eyes contrasting sharply with her smooth and creamy skin. Indeed, Leia saw much of herself in the girl—no, not girl, Leia corrected her own thoughts, but young woman. That same sparkle behind the brown eyes, mischievous, adventurous, determined.

That notion set Leia back a bit, for she recognized then that when she looked at Jaina, she was seeing not a reflection of herself but an image of the girl she had once been. A twinge of sadness caught her as she considered her own life now: a diplomat, a bureaucrat, a mediator, always trying to calm things down, always working for the peace and prosperity of the New Republic. Did she miss the days when the most common noise around her had been the sharp blare of a blaster or the hiss of a lightsaber? Was she sorry that those wild times had been replaced by the droning of the ion drives and the sharp bickering of one pride-wounded emissary after another?

Perhaps, Leia had to admit, but in looking at Jaina and those simmering dark eyes, she could take vicarious pleasure.

Another twinge—jealousy?—caught her by surprise, as Mara and Jaina erupted into laughter over some joke Leia had not overheard. But she pushed the absurd notion far from her mind as she considered her sister-in-law, Luke's wife and Jaina's tutor—at Jaina's own request—in the ways of the Jedi. Mara was not a substitute mother for Jaina, but rather a big sister, and when Leia considered the fires that constantly burned in Mara's green eyes, she understood that the woman could give to Jaina things that Leia could not, and that those lessons and that friendship would prove valuable indeed to her daughter. And so she forced aside her jealousy and was merely glad that Jaina had found such a friend.

She started onto the bridge, but paused again, sensing movement behind her. She knew before looking that it was Bolpuhr, her Noghri bodyguard, and barely gave him a glance as he glided to the side, moving so easily and gracefully that he reminded her of a lace curtain drifting lazily in a gentle breeze. She had accepted young Bolpuhr as her shadow for just that reason, for he was as unobtrusive as any bodyguard could be. Leia marveled at the young Noghri, at how his grace and silence covered a perfectly deadly fighting ability.

She held up her hand, indicating that Bolpuhr should remain out here, and though

his usually emotionless face did flash Leia a quick expression of disappointment, she knew he would obey. Bolpuhr, and all the Noghri, would do anything Leia asked of them. He would jump off a cliff or dive into the hot end of an ion engine for her, and the only time she ever saw any sign of discontentment with her orders was when Bolpuhr thought she might be placing him in a difficult position to properly defend her.

As he was thinking now, Leia understood, though why in the world Bolpuhr would fear for her safety on her sister-in-law's private shuttle was beyond her. Sometimes dedication could be taken a bit too far.

With a nod to Bolpuhr, she turned back to the bridge and crossed through the open doorway. "How much longer?" she asked, and was amused to see both Jaina and Mara jump in surprise at her sudden appearance.

In answer, Jaina increased the magnification on the forward screen, and instead of the unremarkable dots of light, there appeared an image of two planets, one mostly blue and white, the other reddish in hue, seemingly so close together that Leia wondered how it was that the blue-and-white one, the larger of the pair, had not grasped the other in its gravity and turned it into a moon. Parked halfway between them, perhaps a half a million kilometers from either, deck lights glittering in the shadows of the blue-and-white planet, loomed a Mon Calamari battle cruiser, the *Mediator*, one of the newest ships in the New Republic fleet.

"They're at their closest," Mara observed, referring to the planets.

"I beg your indulgence," came a melodic voice from the doorway, and the protocol droid C-3PO walked into the room. "But I do not believe that is correct."

"Close enough," Mara said. She turned to Jaina. "Both Rhommamool and Osarian are ground based, technologically—"

"Rhommamool almost exclusively so!" C-3PO quickly added, drawing a scowl from all three of the women. Oblivious, he rambled on. "Even Osarian's fleet must be considered marginal, at best. Unless, of course, one is using the Pantang Scale of Aero-techno Advancement, which counts even a simple landspeeder as highly as it would a Star Destroyer. Perfectly ridiculous scale."

"Thank you, Threepio," Leia said, her tone indicating that she had heard more than enough.

"They've both got missiles that can hit each other from this close distance, though," Mara continued.

"Oh, yes!" the droid exclaimed. "And given the proximity of their relative elliptical orbits—"

"Thank you, Threepio," Leia said.

"—they will remain within striking distance for some time," C-3PO continued without missing a beat. "Months, at least. In fact, they will be even closer in two standard weeks, the closest they will be to each other for a decade to come."

"Thank you, Threepio!" Mara and Leia said together.

"And the closest they have been for a decade previous," the droid had to slip in, as the women turned back to their conversation.

Mara shook her head, trying to remember her original point to Jaina. "That's why your mother chose to come out now."

"You're expecting a fight?" Jaina asked, and neither Leia nor Mara missed the sparkle in her eye.

"The *Mediator* will keep them behaving," Leia said hopefully. Indeed, the battle cruiser was an impressive warship, an updated and more heavily armed and armored version of the Mon Calamari star cruiser.

Mara looked back to the screen and shook her head, unconvinced. "It'll take more than a show of force to stop this catastrophe," she replied.

"Indeed, it has been escalating, by all reports," C-3PO piped up. "It started as a

simple mining dispute over mineral rights, but now the rhetoric is more appropriate for some kind of a holy crusade.”

“It’s the leader on Rhommamool,” Mara remarked. “Nom Anor. He’s reached down and grabbed his followers by their most basic instincts, weaving the dispute against Osarian into a more general matter of tyranny and oppression. Don’t underestimate him.”

“I can’t begin to give you a full list of tyrants like Nom Anor that I’ve dealt with,” Leia said with a resigned shrug.

“I have that very list available,” C-3PO blurted. “Tonkoss Rathba of—”

“Thank you, Threepio,” Leia said, too politely.

“Why, of course, Princess Leia,” the droid replied. “I do so like to be of service. Now where was I? Oh, yes. Tonkoss Rathba of—”

“Not now, Threepio,” Leia insisted, then to Mara, she added, “I’ve seen his type often.”

“Not like him,” Mara replied, somewhat softly, and the sudden weakness in her voice reminded Leia and Jaina that Mara, despite her nearly constant bravado and overabundance of energy, was seriously ill, with a strange and thankfully rare disease that had killed dozens of others and against which the best doctors in the New Republic had proven completely helpless. Of those who had contracted the molecular disorder, only Mara and one other remained alive, and that other person, being studied intently on Coruscant, was fast dying.

“Daluba,” C-3PO went on. “And of course, there was Icknya—”

Leia started to turn to the droid, hoping to politely but firmly shut him up, but Jaina’s cry stopped her abruptly and swung her back to face the screen.

“Incoming ships!” Jaina announced, her voice full of surprise. The telltale blips had appeared on her sensor viewer as if from nowhere.

“Four of them,” Mara confirmed. Even as she spoke, the warning buzzers began to go off. “From Osarian.” She turned her curious expression up to Leia. “They know who we are?”

Leia nodded. “And they know why I’ve come.”

“Then they should know to leave us alone,” Jaina reasoned.

Leia nodded again, but understood better. She had come to the system not to meet with the Osarians—not at first, at least—but with their principal rival, Nom Anor, the cult figure stirring up trouble on Rhommamool. “Tell them to back off,” she instructed Mara.

“Politely?” Mara asked, smiling, and with that dangerous twinkle in her eyes.

“New Republic shuttle,” a halting voice crackled over the comm. “This is Captain Grappa of Osarian First-Force.”

With a flick of a switch, Mara put an image of the captain on the viewscreen, and Leia sighed as the green skin, spiny head ridge, and tapirlike snout came into view.

“Wonderful,” she remarked sarcastically.

“The Osarians have hired Rodians?” Jaina asked.

“Nothing like a few mercenaries to quiet things down,” Leia replied dryly.

“Oh, dear me,” C-3PO remarked, and he shuffled aside nervously.

“You come with us,” Grappa insisted, his multifaceted eyes sparkling eagerly. “To Osa-Prime.”

“Seems the Osarians want to talk with you first,” Mara said.

“They’re afraid that my meeting with Nom Anor will only heighten his stature, both among the Rhommamoolians and throughout the sector,” Leia reasoned, a notion not without credence, and one that she had debated endlessly before making the decision to come here.

“Whatever the reason, they’re closing fast,” Mara replied. Both she and Jaina looked to Leia for instructions, for while the *Jade Sabre* was Mara’s ship, this was

Leia's mission.

"Princess Leia?" an obviously alarmed C-3PO asked.

Leia sat down in the chair behind Mara, intently studying the screen, which Jaina had switched back to a normal space view. The four approaching fighters were clearly visible.

"Lose them," she said determinedly, a request that neither of the pilots needed to hear twice. Indeed, Mara had been eager to put the shuttle, with its powerful twin engines and state-of-the-art maneuvering systems, through a real test.

Green eyes sparkling, smile wide, Mara reached for the controls, but then retracted her hands and put them on her lap. "You heard her, Jaina," she said.

Jaina's mouth dropped open; so did Leia's.

"You mean it?" Jaina asked.

Mara's only reply was an almost bored expression, along with a slight yawn, as if this whole thing was no big deal, and certainly nothing that Jaina couldn't easily handle.

"Yes!" Jaina whispered, clenching her fists, wearing a smile nearly wide enough to take in her ears. She rubbed her hands together, then reached out to the right, rolling her fingers over the floating-ball control of the inertial compensator. "Strap in," she ordered, and she dialed it down to 95 percent, as fighter pilots often did so that they could gain a tactile feel to the movements of their ships. *Reading the g's*, Jaina had heard it called, and she always preferred flying that way, where fast turns and mighty acceleration could push her back in her seat.

"Not too much," Leia said with concern.

But her daughter was in her element now, Leia knew, and she'd push the shuttle to its limits. Leia felt the lean as Jaina veered right, angling away from the approaching ships.

"If you run, we shoot you down!" came the uneven voice of Grappa.

"Z-95 Headhunters," Mara said derisively of the closing craft, an antiquated starfighter, and she flipped off the comm switch and looked back at Leia. "Can't shoot what you can't catch," she explained. "Kick them in," she added to Jaina, motioning to the primary thrusters, thinking that a burst of the powerful engines would shoot the *Jade Sabre* right past the befuddled Rodians and their outdated starfighters.

Even as she spoke, though, two more blips appeared on the sensors, streaking out from the shadows around Rhommamool, angling right in line with the *Jade Sabre*.

"Mara," Leia said with concern. At that, Mara did reach for the controls. But only for a moment, and then she looked Jaina right in the eye and nodded for the young woman to proceed.

Leia lurched forward in her seat, held back only by the belt, as Jaina reversed throttle and kicked the etheric rudder right. There came a metallic thump behind them—C-3PO hitting the wall, Leia guessed.

Even as the *Jade Sabre* came to a sudden halt, nose turned starboard, Jaina pumped it out to full throttle and kicked the rudder back to the left, then hard right, fishtailing the ship about in a brutal one-eighty, then working the rudder hard and somewhat choppy in straightening out her direct retreat. As they turned, a laser cannon blast cut across their bow.

"All right, the first four are on our tail," Mara instructed calmly. The *Jade Sabre* jolted, hit aft, a blow the shields easily held back.

"Try a—" Mara started to say, but she lost the words, and nearly her lunch, as Jaina pulled a snap roll right, and then another right behind it.

"Oh, we'll be killed!" came C-3PO's cry from the doorway, and Leia managed to turn her head to see the droid leaning in against the metal jamb, and then to see him fly away, with a pitiful cry, as Jaina kicked the etheric rudder again, putting the

ship into another sudden fishtail.

A pair of Headhunters streaked past the viewscreen, but just for a split second, for Jaina vectored away at a different angle, and at single-engine full throttle, pressing Leia back in her seat. Leia wanted to say something to Jaina then, some words of encouragement or advice, but found her words stuck in her throat. And not for any g forces.

It was the sight of Jaina, the fire in her brown eyes, the determined set of her jaw, the sheer concentration. At that moment, Leia knew.

Her daughter was a woman now, and with all the grit of her father and mother combined.

Mara glanced over her right shoulder, between Jaina and Leia, and both followed her lead long enough to see that two of the initial four had altered course accordingly and were fast closing, laser cannons blasting away.

“Hold on,” a confident Jaina warned, and she pulled back the stick, lifting the *Jade Sabre’s* nose, then shoved it forward, dropping the shuttle into a sudden, inverted loop.

“We’re doomed!” C-3PO cried from the hallway—the hallway ceiling, Leia knew.

Halfway around, Jaina broke the loop with a snap roll, then kicked her into a fishtail and a barrel roll, bringing her about to nearly their original course, but with the initial four behind them. Now she did kick in both ion drives, as if to use sheer speed to split the gap between the two incoming fighters.

Both angled out suddenly, then turned back in, widening that escape route but giving them a longer shooting angle at the shuttle, and an easier turn to pursue.

“They’re good,” Mara warned, but, like Leia, she found her words lost in her throat, as Jaina, teeth gritted to fight back the g’s, reversed throttle.

“Princess—” The plaintive cry from the corridor ended abruptly in a loud crash.

“Coming in hot!” Mara cried, noting the fighter fast approaching to port.

Jaina didn’t, couldn’t even hear her; she had turned inward now, was feeling the Force coursing through her, was registering every movement of her enemies and reacting instinctively, playing the game three moves ahead. Before Mara had even begun to speak, Jaina had hit the forward attitude adjustment jets, lifting the nose, then she pumped the throttle and kicked the rudder, lifting the *Jade Sabre* and bringing her nose about to starboard, to directly face the other incoming Headhunter.

And that eager Rodian did come in at them, and hard, and the *Jade Sabre’s* defensive array screeched and lit up, warning of a lock-on.

“Jaina!” Leia cried.

“He’s got us!” Mara added.

But then the closer ship, coming from port, passed right under the *Jade Sabre*, and Jaina fired the repulsorlifts, bouncing the *Jade Sabre* up and sending the poor Headhunter into a wild, spinning roll.

The closing ship from starboard let fly its concussion missile, but it, and the Headhunter, zipped right underneath the elevated *Jade Sabre*.

Before the three women could even begin to catch their breath, another ship streaked in, an X-wing, the new XJ version of the starfighter, its own laser cannons blasting away from its wingtips. Not at the *Jade Sabre*, though, but at the Headhunter that had just gone past.

“Who is that?” Leia asked, and Jaina, equally curious, brought the *Jade Sabre* about hard.

The Headhunter snap-rolled left and dived, but the far superior X-wing stayed on her, lasers scoring hit after hit, depleting her shields and then blasting her apart into a million pieces.

“A Jedi,” Mara and Jaina said together, and Leia, when she paused to collect the

Force sensations about her, concurred.

"Fast to the *Mediator*," Leia instructed her daughter, and Jaina swung the *Jade Sabre* about yet again.

"I didn't know there were any Jedi in the sector," Leia said to Mara, who could only shrug, equally at a loss.

"Another one's out," Jaina informed them, watching the blips on her sensor screen. "And two others are vectoring away."

"They want no part of a Jedi showing a willingness to shoot back," Mara remarked.

"Maybe Rodians are smarter than I thought," Leia said dryly. "Smooth it out," she instructed her daughter, unbuckling and climbing unsteadily to her feet.

Jaina reluctantly dialed the inertial compensator back to full.

"Only one pursuing," Jaina informed them as Leia made her way to the door.

"The X-wing," Mara added, and Leia nodded.

In the hallway outside the bridge, Leia found C-3PO inverted and against the wall, his feet sticking up in the air, his head crunched forward so that his chin was tight against his chest.

"You have to learn to hold on," Leia said to him, helping him upright. She glanced across the way to Bolpuhr as she spoke, to find the Noghri still standing calmly in the exact spot she had assigned him.

Somehow, she wasn't amazed.

Jaina took the *Jade Sabre* at a swift but steady pace toward the distant *Mediator*. She checked often for pursuit, but it quickly became obvious that the Rodians in their outdated Headhunters wanted no part of this fight.

Leia rejoined them a short while later, to find Jaina in complete control and Mara resting back in her seat, eyes closed. Even when Jaina asked her aunt a question about docking procedures, the woman didn't respond, didn't even open her eyes.

"They'll guide you in," Leia interjected, and sure enough, a voice from the *Mediator* crackled over the opened comm, giving explicit directions for entry vector.

Jaina took her in, and Jaina took her down, easily—and after the display of flying she had just given them out with the Headhunters, Leia wasn't the least bit surprised by her ability to so smoothly tight-dock a ship as large as the *Jade Sabre*.

That final shudder as Jaina eased off the repulsorlifts and settled the shuttle onto the docking bay floor stirred Mara from her rest. She opened her eyes and, seeing where they were, rose quickly.

And then she swayed and seemed as if she would fall.

Leia and Jaina were there in an instant, catching and steadying her.

She regained her balance and took a deep breath. "Maybe next time you can dial down the inertial compensator to ninety-seven instead of ninety-five," she said jokingly, straining a smile.

Jaina laughed, but Leia's face showed her deep concern. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Mara eyed her directly.

"Perhaps we should find a place where you can rest," Leia said.

"Where we all can rest," Mara corrected, and her tone told Leia to back off, a reminder that Leia was intruding on a private place for Mara, a place she had explicitly instructed all of her friends, even her husband, not to go. This disease was Mara's fight alone, to Mara's thinking, a battle that had forced her to reconsider everything she thought about her life, past, present, and future, and everything she thought about death.

Leia held her stare for a moment longer, but replaced her own concerned expression with one of acceptance. Mara did not want to be coddled or cuddled. She was determined to live on in an existence that did not name her disease as the most

pressing and important facet of her entire life, to live on as she had before, with the illness being relegated to the position of nuisance, and nothing more.

Of course, Leia understood it to be much more than that, an internal churning that required Mara to spend hours and tremendous Force energy merely holding it in check. But that was Mara's business.

"I hope to meet with Nom Anor tomorrow," Leia explained, as the three, with C-3PO and Bolpuhr in tow, headed for the lower hatch, then moved down to the landing bay. A contingent of New Republic Honor Guard stood waiting there, along with Commander Ackdool, a Mon Calamarian with large, probing eyes, a fishlike face, and salmon-colored skin. "By all reports, we should all be rested before dealing with him."

"Believe those reports," Mara said.

"And first, it seems I get to meet with our savior Jedi," Leia added dryly, looking back behind the *Jade Sabre* to see the X-wing gliding in to rest.

"Wurth Skidder," Jaina remarked, recognizing the markings under the canopy on the starfighter.

"Why am I not surprised?" Leia asked, and she blew a sigh.

Ackdool came over to them, then, and extended his formal greetings to the distinguished guests, but Leia's reaction set him back on his heels—indeed, it raised more than a few eyebrows among the members of the *Mediator's* Honor Guard.

"Why did you send him out?" Leia snapped, motioning toward the docking X-wing.

Commander Ackdool started to answer, but Leia continued. "If we had needed assistance, we would have called for it."

"Of course, Princess Leia," Commander Ackdool said with a polite bow.

"They why send him out?"

"Why do you assume that Wurth Skidder flew out at my command?" the cool Commander Ackdool dared to respond. "Why would you assume that Wurth Skidder heeds any order I might give?"

"Couple o' ridge-head parachutes floating over Osarian, if those Rodians had any luck," came the singsong voice of Wurth Skidder. The cocky young man was fast approaching, pulling off his helmet and giving his shock of blond hair a tousle as he walked.

Leia stepped out to intercept him and took another quick step for no better reason than to make the Jedi stop short. "Wurth Skidder," she said.

"Princess," the man replied with a bow.

"Did you have a little fun out there?"

"More than a little," the Jedi said with a wide grin and a snuffle—and he always seemed to be sniffing, and his hair always looked as if he had just walked in from a Tatooine sandstorm. "Fun for me, I mean, and not for the Rodians."

"And the cost of your fun?" Leia asked.

That took the smile from Wurth Skidder's face, and he looked at Leia curiously, obviously not understanding.

"The cost," Leia explained. "What did your little excursion cost?"

"A couple of proton torpedos," Wurth replied with a shrug. "A little fuel."

"And a year of diplomatic missions to calm down the Osarians," Leia retorted.

"But they shot first," Wurth protested.

"Do you even understand that your stupidity likely escalated an already impossible situation?" Leia's voice was as firm and cold as anyone present had ever heard it. So cold, in fact, that the always overprotective Bolpuhr, fearing trouble, glided closer to her, hanging back just behind her left shoulder, within fast striking distance of the Jedi.

"They were attacking you," Wurth Skidder retorted. "Six of them!"

"They were trying to bring us down to Osarian," Leia harshly explained. "A not-so-unexpected response, given my announced intentions here. And so we planned to avoid them. Avoid! Do you understand that word?"

Wurth Skidder said nothing.

"Avoid them and thus cause no further problems or hard feelings," Leia went on. "And so we would have, and we would have asked for no explanations from Shunta Osarian Dharrg, all of us pretending that nothing had ever happened."

"But—"

"And our graciousness in not mentioning this unfortunate incident would have bought me the bargaining capital I need to bring some kind of conciliation from Osarian toward Rhommamool," Leia continued, anger creeping in thicker with each word. "But now we can't do that, can we? Now, so that Wurth Skidder could paint another skull on the side of his X-wing, I'll have to deal with an incident."

"They shot first," Wurth Skidder reiterated when it became apparent that Leia was done.

"And better that they had shot last," Leia replied. "And if Shunta Osarian Dharrg demands reparations, we'll agree, with all apologies, and any monies to be paid will come from Wurth Skidder's private funds."

The Jedi squared his shoulders at the suggestion, but then Leia hit him with a sudden and devastating shot. "My brother will see to it."

Wurth Skidder bowed again, glared at Leia and all around, then turned on his heel and walked briskly away.

"My apologies, Princess Leia," Ackdool said. "But I have no real authority over Jedi Skidder. I had thought it a blessing when he arrived two weeks ago. His Jedi skills should certainly come in handy against any terrorist attempts—and we have heard rumors of many—against the *Mediator*."

"And you are indeed within striking distance of surface missiles," C-3PO added, but he stopped short, this time catching on to the many disapproving looks that came his way.

"I did not know that Jedi Skidder would prove so ..." Ackdool paused, searching for the right word. "Intractable."

"Stubborn, you mean," Leia said. As they all started away, Leia did manage a bit of a smile when she heard Mara behind her tell Jaina, "Maybe Nom Anor has met his match."

C-9PO, a protocol droid, its copper coloring tinged red from the constantly blowing dusts of Rhommamool, skittered down an alley to the side of the main avenue of Redhaven and peeked out cautiously at the tumult beyond. The fanatical followers of Nom Anor, the Red Knights of Life, had gone on the rampage again, riding throughout the city in an apparent purge of landspeeders on their tutakans, eight-legged lizards with enormous tusks that climbed right up past their black eyes and curled in like white eyebrows.

"Ride the beasts given by Life!" one Red Knight screamed at a poor civilian as the wrinkled Dressellian merchant was dragged from the cockpit and punched and pushed to the ground.

"Perversion!" several other Red Knights cried in unison. "Life-pretender!" And they set upon the landspeeder with their tubal-iron pummelstaves, smashing the windshield, bashing in the side moldings, crushing the steering wheel and other controls, even knocking one of the rear drive's cylindrical engines from its mounts.

Satisfied that the craft was wrecked beyond repair, they pulled the Dressellian to his feet and shoved him to and fro, warning him to ride creatures, not machines—or, better still, to use the legs that nature had provided and walk. Then they beat him back down to the ground and moved on, some climbing back atop the tutakans,

others running beside.

The landspeeder continued to hover, though it had only a couple of repulsors still firing. It looked more like a twisted lump of beaten metal than a vehicle, tilting to one side because of the unequal weight distribution and the weakened lift capacity.

"Oh, dear me," the protocol droid said, ducking low as the contingent stormed past.

Tap, tap, tap came the ringing of metal on metal against the top of the droid's head. C-9PO slowly turned about and saw the fringe of the telltale black capes, and the red-dyed hides.

With a screech, the droid stood up and tried to run away, but a pummelstave smashed in the side of his leg and he went facedown in the red dust. He lifted his head, but rising up on his arms only gave the two Red Knights a better handhold as they walked past, each scooping the droid under one shoulder and dragging him along.

"Got a Ninepio," one of the pair called out to his lizard-riding buddies, and a cheer went up.

The doomed droid knew the destination: the Square of Hopeful Redemption.

C-9PO was glad that he wasn't programmed to experience pain.

* * *

"It was a stupid thing to do," Leia said firmly.

"Wurth thought he was helping us," Jaina reminded, but Leia wasn't buying that argument.

"Wurth was trying to find his own thrills," she corrected.

"And that hotshot attitude of his will reinforce the ring of truth to Nom Anor's diatribes against the Jedi," Mara said. "He's not without followers on Osarian." As she finished, she looked down at the table, at the pile of leaflets Commander Ackdool had given them, colorful propaganda railing against the New Republic, against the Jedi, and against anything mechanical and technological, and somehow tying all of these supposed ills to the cultural disease that engulfed the society of the planet Osarian.

"Why does Nom Anor hate the Jedi?" Jaina asked. "What do we have to do with the struggle between Osarian and Rhommamool? I never even heard of these planets until you mentioned that we'd be coming here."

"The Jedi have nothing to do with this struggle," Leia replied. "Or at least, they didn't until Wurth Skidder's antics."

"Nom Anor hates the New Republic," Mara added. "And he hates the Jedi as symbols of the New Republic."

"Is there anything Nom Anor doesn't hate?" Leia asked dryly.

"Don't take him lightly," Mara warned yet again. "His religious cry to abandon technology and machines, to look for truth in the natural elements and life of the universe, and to resist the joining of planets in false confederations resonates deeply in many people, particularly those who have been the victims of such planetary alliances, like the miners of Rhommamool."

Leia didn't disagree. She had spent many hours before and during the journey here reading the history of the two planets, and she knew that the situation on Rhommamool was much more complicated than that. While many of the miners had traveled to the inhospitable red planet voluntarily, there were quite a number who were the descendants of the original "colonists"—involuntary immigrants sent there to work the mines because of high crimes they had committed.

Whatever the truth of the situation, though, Leia couldn't deny that Rhommamool was the perfect breeding ground for zealots like Nom Anor. Life there was tough—

even basics like water could be hard to come by—while the prosperous Osarians lived in comfort on white sandy beaches and crystal-clear lakes.

“I still don’t understand how any of that concerns the Jedi,” Jaina remarked.

“Nom Anor was stirring up anger against the Jedi long before he ever came to Rhommamool,” Mara explained. “Here, he’s just found a convenient receptacle for his wrath.”

“And with the Jedi Knights scattered throughout the galaxy, and so many of them following their own agendas, Nom Anor might just find plenty of ammunition to add to his arguments,” Leia added grimly. “I’m glad that my brother is thinking of reestablishing the Jedi Council.”

Mara nodded, but Jaina seemed less convinced. “Jacen doesn’t think that’s such a good idea,” she reminded her mother.

Leia shrugged. Her oldest son, Jaina’s twin, had indeed expressed serious doubts about the course of the Jedi Knights.

“If we can’t bring some sense of order to the galaxy, particularly to isolated planets like Osarian and Rhommamool, then we’re no better than the Empire,” Mara remarked.

“We’re better than the Empire,” Leia insisted.

“Not in Nom Anor’s eyes,” Jaina said.

And Mara reiterated her warning to Leia not to take the man lightly. “He’s the strangest man I ever met,” she explained, and given her past exploits with notorious sorts like Jabba the Hutt and Talon Karrde, that was quite a statement. “Even when I tried to use the Force to gain a better perspective on him, I drew ...” Mara paused, as if looking for some way to properly express the feeling. “A blank,” she decided. “As if the Force had nothing to do with him.”

Leia and Jaina looked at her curiously.

“No,” Mara corrected. “More like he had nothing to do with the Force.”

The perfect disconnected ideologue, Leia thought, and she expressed her feelings with a single sarcastic word:

“Wonderful.”

He stood on the platform surrounded by his fanatical Red Knights. Before him, ten thousand Rhommamoolians crowded into every open space of the great public square of Redhaven, once the primary trading spaceport of the planet. But those facilities had been leveled in the early days of the uprising, with the Rhommamoolians declaring their independence from Osarian. And more recently, since the coming of Nom Anor as spearhead of the revolution, the place had been renamed the Square of Hopeful Redemption.

Here, the citizens came to declare freedom from Osarian.

Here, the followers came to renounce the New Republic.

Here, the believers came to renounce the Jedi.

And here, the fanatics came to discredit progress and technology, to cry out for a simpler time, when the strength of a being’s legs, and not the weight of his purse, determined how far he could travel, and the strength of his hands, and not the weight of his purse, allowed him to harvest the gifts of nature.

Nom Anor loved it all, the adulation and the fanatical, bordering on suicidal, devotion. He cared nothing for Rhommamool or its inhabitants, cared nothing for the foolish cries for some ridiculous “simpler time.”

But how he loved the chaos his words and followers inflicted upon the order of the galaxy. How he loved the brooding undercurrent of resentment toward the New Republic, and the simmering anger aimed at the Jedi Knights, these supercreatures of the galaxy.

Wouldn’t his superiors be pleased?

Nom Anor flipped his shiny black cape back from his shoulder and held his fist upraised into the air, drawing shrieks of appreciation. In the center of the square, where once had stood the Portmaster's Pavilion, now was a huge pit, thirty meters in diameter and ten deep. Whistles and whines emanated from that pit, along with cries for mercy and pitifully polite words of protest—the voices of droids collected by the folk of Rhommamool and dropped into the hole.

Great cheers erupted from all corners of the square as a pair of the Red Knights entered from one avenue, dragging a 9PO protocol droid between them. They went to the edge of the pit, took up the poor 9PO by the arms and the legs, and on a three-count, launched him onto the pile of metal consisting of the astromech and mine-sniffer droids, the Redhaven street-cleaner droids, and the personal butler droids of the wealthier Rhommamoolian citizens.

When the hooting and cheering died down, Nom Anor opened his hands, revealing a single small stone. Then he clenched his fist again, squeezing with tremendous power, crushing the stone in his grasp so that dust and flecks of rock splinters slipped out the sides.

The signal to begin.

As one the crowd surged forward, lifting great chunks of stone, the debris from the wreckage of the pavilion. They came to the edge of the pit one after another and hurled their heavy missiles at the pile of droids.

The stoning went on for the rest of the afternoon, until the red glare of the sun thinned to a brilliant crimson line along the horizon, until the dozens and dozens of droids were no more than scrap metal and sparking wires.

And Nom Anor, silent and dignified, watched it all somberly, accepting this great tribute his followers had paid to him, this public execution of the hated droids.

LEGACY ERA

(40+ YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*)

The Yuuzhan Vong have been defeated, but the galaxy has been slow to recover from their depredations, with powerful worlds chafing at the economic burdens and military restrictions put upon them by the nascent Galactic Alliance, once-powerful species seeking to rise again, newly prosperous worlds testing their influence, and long-buried secrets coming to light. The result of all this instability is civil war. Faced with a Galactic Alliance that has fallen away from its values, Luke and the Jedi Order must decide where their loyalties lie—and so, too, must the heroes of the Rebellion.

While hostilities spread across the Core Worlds, lurking in the shadows is a Sith adept who wastes no time in taking advantage of the galactic chaos to wage a very personal war against the Skywalkers and the Solos. Luke will face terrible loss, Han and Leia will be tested as never before, and their daughter, Jaina, will learn just what it means to fulfill her destiny as “the Sword of the Jedi.” And even as the Galactic Alliance pulls the galaxy back from the brink of total disaster, the Skywalker-Solo clan will never be the same again.

The mop-up is difficult. Luke Skywalker is exiled from Coruscant, and while he and his son, Jedi Knight Ben Skywalker, set out on a quest to discover what caused such darkness to befall the galaxy and their family, Han and Leia are left to raise their granddaughter, Allana, and help shepherd the government back into some semblance of order. But little do any of them know that a long-lost tribe of Sith is making its way toward the Core, determined to fulfill their destiny of dominance over the galaxy ... and that both Sith and Jedi are about to run headlong into a terrifying creature of untold Force abilities and an insatiable appetite for power ...

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- *Legacy of the Force: Betrayal*, by Aaron Allston: The first in the nine-book Legacy of the Force series, setting the stage for galactic civil war and a fall to darkness.
- *Millennium Falcon*, by James Luceno: Han Solo's famous freighter becomes a character in her own right as Han, Leia, their granddaughter Allana, and the droid C-3PO set out on an adventure that brings to light the ship's colorful, mysterious past.
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STAR WARS

LEGACY OF THE FORCE

The thrilling
launch of an
epic new *Star Wars*
series, featuring
the heroes of the
New Jedi Order!

BETRAYAL

— AARON ALLSTON

chapter one

CORUSCANT

“He doesn’t exist.” With those words, spoken without any conscious thought or effort on his part, Luke Skywalker sat upright in bed and looked around at the dimly illuminated chamber.

There wasn’t much to see. Members of the Jedi order, even Masters such as Luke, didn’t accumulate much personal property. Within view were chairs situated in front of unlit computer screens; a wall rack holding plaststeel staves and other practice weapons; a table littered with personal effects such as datapads, notes scrawled on scraps of flimsi, datachips holding reports from various Jedi Masters, and a crude and not at all accurate sandglass statuette in Luke’s image sent to him by a child from Tatooine. Inset into the stone-veneer walls were drawers holding his and Mara’s limited selection of clothes. Their lightsabers were behind Luke, resting on a shelf on the headboard of their bed.

His wife, Mara Jade Skywalker, had more personal items and equipment, of course. Disguises, weapons, communications gear, falsified documents. A former spy, she had never given up the trappings of that trade, but those items weren’t here. Luke wasn’t sure where she kept them. She didn’t bother him with such details.

Beside him, she stirred, and he glanced down at her. Her red hair, kept a medium length this season, was an unruly mess, but there was no sleepiness in her eyes when they opened. In brighter light, he knew, those eyes were an amazing green. “Who doesn’t exist?” she asked.

“I don’t know. An enemy.”

“You dreamed about him?”

He nodded. “I’ve had the dream a couple of times before. It’s not just a dream. It’s coming to me through currents in the Force. He’s all wrapped up in shadows—a dark hooded cloak, but more than that, shadows of light and ...” Luke shook his head, struggling for the correct word. “And ignorance. And denial. And he brings great pain to the galaxy ... and to me.”

“Well, if he brings pain to the galaxy, you’re obviously going to feel it.”

“No, to me personally, in addition to his other evil.” Luke sighed and lay down again. “It’s too vague. And when I’m awake, when I try to peer into the future to find him, I can’t.”

“Because he doesn’t exist.”

“That’s what the dream tells me.” Luke hissed in aggravation.

“Could it be Raynar?”

Luke considered. Raynar Thul, former Jedi Knight, presumed dead during the Yuuzhan Vong war, had been discovered a few years earlier—horribly burned during the war, mentally transformed in the years since through his involvement with the insectoid Killik race. That transformation had been a malevolent one, and the Jedi order had had to deal with him. Now he languished in a well-protected cell deep within the Jedi Temple, undergoing treatment for his mental and physical afflictions.

Treatment. Treatment meant change; perhaps, in changing, Raynar was becoming

something new, and Luke's presentment pointed toward the being Raynar would someday become.

Luke shook his head and pushed the possibility away. "In this vision, I don't sense Raynar's alienness. Mentally, emotionally, whoever it is remains human, or near human. There's even the possibility that it's my father." "Darth Vader."

"No. Before he was Darth Vader. Or just when he was becoming Vader." Luke's gaze lost focus as he tried to recapture the dream. "What little of his face I can see reminds me of the features of Anakin Skywalker as a Jedi. But his eyes ... as I watch, they turn a molten gold or orange, transforming from Force-use and anger ..."

"I have an idea."

"Tell me."

"Let's wait until he shows up, then crush him."

Luke smiled. "All right." He closed his eyes and his breathing slowed, an effort to return to sleep.

Within a minute the rhythm of his breathing became that of natural sleep.

But Mara lay awake, her attention on the ceiling—beyond it, through dozens of floor levels of the Jedi enclave to the skies of Coruscant above—and searched for any hint, any flicker of what it was that was causing her husband worry.

She found no sign of it. And she, too, slept.

ADUMAR

The gleaming pearl-gray turbolift doors slid open sideways, and warm air bearing an aroma that advertised death and destruction washed over Jacen Solo, his cousin Ben Skywalker, and their guide.

Jacen took a deep breath and held it. The odors of this subterranean factory were not the smells of corrupted flesh or gangrenous wounds—smells Jacen was familiar with—but those of labor and industry. The great chamber before them had been a missile manufacturing center for decades, and no amount of rigorous cleaning would ever be quite able to eliminate the odors of sweat, machine lubricant, newly fabricated composite materials, solid fuel propellants, and high explosives that filled the air.

Jacen expelled the breath and stepped out of the turbolift, then walked the handful of steps up to the rail overlooking the chamber. He walked rapidly so that his Jedi cloak would billow a little as he strode, so that his boot heels would ring on the metal flooring of this observation catwalk, and so his apprentice and guide would be left behind for a moment. This was a performance for his guide and all the other representatives of the Dammant Killers company. Jacen knew he was carrying off his role quite well; the company officials he'd been dealing with remained properly intimidated. But he didn't know whether to attribute his success to his bearing and manner, his lean, brooding, and handsome looks, or his name—for on this world of Adumar, with its history of fascination with pilots, the name of Jacen's father, Han Solo, went a very long way.

His guide, a slender, balding man named Testan ke Harran, moved up to the rail to Jacen's right. Contrasting with the dull grays and blues that were common on this factory's walls and its workers' uniforms, Testan was a riot of color—his tunic, with its nearly knee-length hem and its flowing sleeves, was the precise orange of X-wing fighter pilot uniforms, though decorated with purple crisscross lines breaking it down into a flickering expanse of small diamond shapes, and his trousers, belt, and scarf were a gleaming gold.

Testan stroked his lustrous black beard, the gesture a failed attempt to conceal the man's nervousness. Jacen felt, rather than saw, Ben move up on the other side of Testan.

"You can see," Testan said, "ar workars enjoy very fan conditions."

Ben cleared his throat. "He says their workers enjoy very fine conditions."

Jacen nodded absently. He understood Testan's words, and it had taken him little time to learn and understand the Adumari accent, but this was another act, a ploy to keep the Adumari off-balance. He leaned forward to give the manufacturing floor below his full attention.

The room was large enough to act as a hangar and maintenance bay for four full squadrons of X-wing snubfighters. Tall duracrete partitions divided the space into eight lanes, each of which enclosed an assembly line; materials entered through small portals in the wall to the left, rolled along on luminous white conveyor belts, and eventually exited through portals on the far right. Laborers in gray jumpsuits flanked the belts and worked on the materials as they passed.

On the nearest belt, immediately below Jacen, the materials being worked on appeared to be compact visual sensor assemblies. The conveyor belt brought in eight such units and stopped. Moving quickly, the laborers plugged small cables into the units and turned to look into monitors, which showed black-and-white images of jumpsuited waists and worker hands. The workers turned the units this way and that, confirming that the sensors were properly calibrated.

One monitor never lit up with a view from the sensor. The worker on that unit unplugged it and set it on a table running parallel to the conveyor belt. A moment later, the other workers on this section unplugged their sensor units and the conveyor belt jerked into motion again, carrying the remaining seven units to the next station.

One lane over, the conveyor belt remained in constant motion, carrying sensor unit housings along. The workers on that belt, fewer in number than the sensor testers, reached out occasionally to turn a housing, to look inside, to examine the exterior for cracks or warping. Some workers, distributed at intervals along the line, rapped each housing with a small rubber-headed hammer. Jacen assumed they were listening for a musical tone he could not possibly hear at this distance over the roar of noise from the floor.

Another lane away from him, the workers were clad not in jumpsuits but in full-coverage hazardous materials suits of a lighter and more reflective gray than the usual worker outfit. Their conveyor belt carried white plates bearing irregular balls the size of a human head but a nearly luminous green. The belt stopped as each set of eight such balls entered the lane, giving the workers time to plunge needlelike sensors into each ball. They, too, checked monitors for a few seconds before withdrawing the needles to allow the balls to continue on. Jacen knew that poisonous green—it was the color of the high explosive Adumari manufacturers used to fabricate the concussion missiles they exported.

While Jacen made his initial survey, Ben kept their guide occupied. “Do you wax your beard?” he asked.

“I do not.”

“It just seems very shiny. Do you oil it?”

Testan’s voice was a little more irritated in tone. “I do not oil it. I condition it. And I brush it.”

“Do you brush it with butter?”

Jacen finally looked to the right, past Testan and at his cousin. Ben was thirteen standard years of age, not tall but well muscled, with a fine-featured freckled face under a mass of flame-red hair. Ben turned, his face impassive, to look at Jacen, then said, “The Jedi Knight acknowledges that this factory seems to meet the minimum, the absolute minimum, required safety and comfort standards of a Galactic Alliance military contractor.”

Jacen nodded. The nod meant *Good improvisation*. He was exerting no Force skill to communicate words to Ben; Ben’s role was to pretend to act as his mentor’s translator, when his actual function was to convince the locals that adult Jedi were even more aloof and mysterious than they had thought.

“No, no, no.” Testan drew a sleeve over his brow, dabbing away a little perspiration. “We are well above minimum standards. Those duracrete barriers? They will vent any explosive force upward, saving the majority of workers in case of calamity. Worker shifts are only two-fifths the day in length, unlike the old days.”

Ben repeated Testan’s words, and Jacen shrugged.

Ben imitated his motion. The gesture caused his own Jedi robe to gape open, revealing the lightsaber hanging from his belt.

Testan glanced at it, then looked back at Jacen, clearly worried. “Your apprentice —” Unsure, he looked to Ben again. “You are very young, are you not, to be wearing such a weapon?”

Ben gave him a blank look. “It’s a practice lightsaber.”

“Ah.” Testan nodded as though he understood.

And there it was. Perhaps it was just the thought of a thirteen-year-old with a deadly cutting implement at hand, but Testan’s defenses slipped enough that the worry began to pour through.

It was like the game in which children are told, “For the next hour, *do not think about banthas*.” Try as they might, they would, within minutes or even seconds, think about a bantha.

Testan’s control finally gave way and he thought about the banthas—or, rather, a place he wasn’t supposed to go, even to think about. Jacen could feel Testan try to clamp down on the thought. Something in the increased potency of that worry told Jacen that they must be nearer to the source of his concern than during previous parts of their factory tour.

When Testan turned back, Jacen looked directly at him and said, “There is something here. Something wrong.” They were the first words he’d spoken in Testan’s presence.

Testan shook his head. “No. Evrything is fan.”

Jacen looked past him, toward the wall to the far right of the chamber. It was gray and regular, a series of metal panels each the height of a man and twice as wide stacked like bricks. He began a slow, deliberate scrutiny, traversing right to left. His gaze swept the walls, the assembly lines, the elevated observation chamber directly opposite the turbolifts by which they had entered, and continued along the wall to the left.

As his attention reached the middle of the left wall, along the observation balcony, he felt another pulse of worry from Testan. Ben cleared his throat, a signal; the boy, though nowhere near as sensitive in the Force as Jacen, had gotten the same feeling.

Jacen set off along the balcony in that direction. This time the ringing of his boots and billowing of his cloak were a side effect of his speed rather than an act.

“You wish to see the observation chamber?” Testan hurried to keep up. His anxiety was growing, and there was something within it, like a shiny stone at the bottom of a murky pond.

Jacen reached into that pond to draw out the prize within.

It was a memory of a door. It was broad and gray, closing from above as men and women—in dark blue jumpsuits, the outfits of supervisors in this facility—scurried out ahead of its closing. When it settled in place, it was identical to the wall panels Jacen saw ahead of him in the here and now.

Jacen glanced over his shoulder at Testan. “Your thoughts betray you.”

Testan paled. “No, there is nothing to betray.”

Jacen rounded the observation balcony corner, took a few more steps, and skidded to a halt in front of one of the wall sections.

It was here. He knew because he could feel something beyond.

Conflict. He himself was there, fighting. So was Ben. It was a faint glimpse of the future, and he and his apprentice would be in peril beyond.

He jerked his head toward the wall.

Ben brought out his lightsaber and switched it on. With a *snap-hiss* sound, its blue blade of coherent energy extended to full length.

Ben plunged the blade into the wall panel and began to drag it around in a large circle.

Testan, his voice pained, said, “He told us it was a practice weapon.”

Jacen gave him an innocent look. “It’s true from a certain point of view. He does practice with it.” In his nervousness, Testan didn’t seem to notice that Jacen was understanding him clearly now.

Ben completed his circle and gave the meter-and-a-half-high section he’d outlined a little kick. It fell away into a well-lit chamber, clanging on the floor beyond; the edges still glowed with the heat the lightsaber had poured into them.

Ben stepped through. Jacen ducked to follow. He heard Testan muttering—doubtless an alert into a comlink. Jacen didn’t bother to interfere. They’d just been

within clear sight of hundreds of workers and the observation chamber. Dealing with Testan wouldn't keep the alarm from being broadcast.

The room beyond Ben's improvised doorway was actually a corridor, four meters wide and eight high, every surface made up of the same dull gray metal rectangles found in the outer chamber, greenish white light pouring from the luminous ceiling. To the left, the corridor ended after a few meters, and that end was heavily packed with tall plastel transport containers. They were marked DANGER, DO NOT DROP, and DAMMANT KILLER MODEL 16, QUANTITY 24.

To the right, the corridor extended another forty meters and then opened up; the rail and drop-off at the end suggested that it opened onto another observation balcony above another fabrication chamber.

Now making the turn from the balcony into the corridor and running toward them were half a dozen troops armed with blaster rifles. Their orange jumpsuits were reminiscent of X-wing pilot uniforms, but the green carapace armor over their lower legs, torsos, lower arms, and heads was more like stormtrooper speeder bike armor painted the wrong color.

And then behind the first six troops came another six, and then another eight ...

Jacen brought his lightsaber out and snapped it into life; the incandescent green of his blade was reflected as highlights against the walls and the armor of the oncoming troops. "Stay behind me," he said.

"Yes, sir." Ben's sigh was audible, and Jacen grinned.

The foremost trooper, who bore gold bars on his helmet and wrists, shouted, his voice mechanically amplified: "Stop whar you are! This saction is restricted!"

Jacen moved forward at a walk. He rotated his wrist, moving his lightsaber blade around in front of him in a pattern vaguely reminiscent of butterfly wings. He shouted back, "Could you speak up? I'm a little deaf."

Ben snickered. "Good one."

"You may not entar this saction!"

They were now twenty meters from the ranks of troopers ahead.

Jacen continued twirling his blade in a practice form. "Fewer people will be hurt if you just get out of my way." It was a sort of ritual thing to say. Massed enemy forces almost never backed down, despite the reputation of the Jedi—a reputation that became more widespread, more supernatural, with each year the Jedi prospered under Luke Skywalker's leadership.

The phrase was ritual in another way, too. Once upon a time, Jacen would have felt tragedy surround him when his actions resulted in the deaths of common soldiers, common guards. But over time he'd lost that sense. There was a wearying inevitability to leaders sending their troops to die against more powerful enemies. It had been happening as long as there were violent leaders and obedient followers. In death, these people became one with the Force, and when Jacen had accepted that fact, his sense of tragedy had largely evaporated.

He took another two steps and the trooper commander called, "Fire!"

The troopers began firing. Jacen gave himself over to the Force, to his awareness of his surroundings, to his sudden oneness with the men and women trying to kill him.

He simply ignored most of the blaster bolts. When he felt them angling in toward him, he twirled his lightsaber blade in line and batted them away, usually back toward the crowd of troopers. In the first few seconds of their assault, four troopers fell to blasts launched by their friends. The smell of burned flesh began to fill the corridor.

Jacen felt danger from behind; felt Ben react to it. Jacen didn't shift his attention; he continued his march forward. He'd prefer to be able to protect the inexperienced youth, but the boy was good at blaster defense practice. Hard as it was to trust a

Jedi whose skills were just developing, he had to. To teach, to learn, he had to trust.

Jacen intercepted the next blaster shot that came his way and batted it toward the trooper commander. It struck the man in the helmet and caromed off, burning out against the ceiling; a portion four meters square of the ceiling's illumination winked out, darkening the corridor. The commander fell. The shot was probably not fatal—protected by his helmet, the man would have forehead and scalp burns, probably a concussion, but he was unlikely to die.

The strategy had its desired effect. The troopers saw their commander fall. They continued firing but also exchanged looks. Jacen never broke pace, and a trooper with silver stripes on his helmet called "Back, back." In good order, the troopers began a withdrawal.

Behind him, Jacen heard more blasterfire and the distinctive *zap* of a lightsaber blade intercepting it, deflecting it. Within the flow of the Force, Jacen felt a shot coming in toward his back, felt it being slapped aside, saw and felt it as it hit the wall to his right. The heat from the shot warmed his right shoulder.

But the defenders continued their retreat, and soon the last of them was around the corner. Jacen's path to the railing was clear. He strode up to it.

Over the rail, a dozen meters down, was another assembly-line pit, where line after line of munitions components was being assembled—though at the moment all the lines were stopped, their anonymous jumpsuited workers staring up at Jacen.

Jacen's movement out of the corridor brought him within sight of the orange-and-green defenders, who were now arrayed in disciplined rows along the walkway to Jacen's left. As soon as he reached the railing they opened fire again. Their tighter formation allowed them to concentrate their fire, and Jacen found himself deflecting more shots than before.

He felt rather than saw Ben scoot into position behind him, but no blaster bolts came at him from that direction. "What now?" Ben asked.

"Finish the mission." Jacen caught a too-close bolt on his blade near the hilt; unable to aim the deflection, he saw the bolt flash down into the assembly area. It hit a monitor screen. The men and women near the screen dived for cover. Jacen winced; a fraction of a degree of arc difference and that bolt could have hit an explosives package. As inured as he was to causing death, he didn't want to cause it by accident.

"But you're in charge—"

"I'm busy." Jacen took a step forward to give himself more maneuvering and swinging space and concentrated on his attackers. He needed to protect himself and Ben now, to defend a broader area. He focused on batting bolt after bolt back into the ranks of the attackers, saw one, two, three of the soldiers fall.

There was a lull in the barrage of fire. Jacen took a moment to glance over his shoulder. Ben stood at the railing, staring down into the manufacturing line, and to his eye he held a small but expensive holocam unit—the sort carried by wealthy vacationers and holocam hobbyists all over the galaxy.

As Jacen returned his attention to the soldiers, Ben began talking: "Um, this is Ben Skywalker. Jedi Knight Jacen Solo and I are in a, I don't know, secret part of the Dammant Killers plant under the city of Cartann on the planet Adumar. You're looking at a missile manufacturing line. It's making missiles that are not being reported to the GA. They're selling to planets that aren't supposed to be getting them. Dammant is breaking the rules. Oh, and the noise you're hearing? Their guys are trying to kill us."

Jacen felt Ben's motion as the boy swung to record the blaster-versus-lightsaber conflict.

"Is that enough?" Ben asked.

Jacen shook his head. "Get the whole chamber. And while you're doing it, figure

out what we're supposed to do next."

"I was kind of thinking we ought to get out of here."

With the tip of his lightsaber blade, Jacen caught a blast that was crackling in toward his right shin. He popped the blast back toward its firer. It hit the woman's blaster rifle, searing it into an unrecognizable lump, causing her green shoulder armor momentarily to catch fire. She retreated, one of her fellow soldiers patting out her flames. Now there were fewer than fifteen soldiers standing against the Jedi, and their temporary commander was obviously rethinking his *make-a-stand* orders.

"Good. How?"

"Well, the way we came in—no. They'd be waiting for us."

"Correct."

"And you never want to fight the enemy on ground he's chosen if you can avoid it."

Jacen grinned. Ben's words, so adult, were a quote from Han Solo, a man whose wisdom was often questionable—except on matters of personal survival. "Also correct."

"So ... the ends of those assembly lines?"

"Good. So go."

Jacen heard the scrape of a heel as Ben vaulted over the rail. Not waiting, Jacen leapt laterally, clearing the rail by half a meter, and spun as he fell. Ahead of and below him, Ben was just landing in a crouch on the nearest assembly line, which was loaded with opalescent shell casings. As Jacen landed, bent knees and a little upward push from the Force easing the impact, Ben raced forward, reflexively swatting aside the grasping hand of a too-bold line worker, and crouched as he lunged through the diminutive portal at the end of the line.

Jacen followed. He heard and felt the heat of blaster bolts hitting the assembly line behind him. He swung his lightsaber back over his shoulder, intercepting one bolt, taking the full force of the impact rather than deflecting the bolt into a neighboring line.

No line workers tried to grab him, and in seconds he was squeezing through the portal.

STAR WARS

FATE OF THE JEDI



OUTCAST

AARON ALLSTON

New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Betrayal*



GALACTIC ALLIANCE DIPLOMATIC SHUTTLE, HIGH CORUSCANT ORBIT

ONE BY ONE, THE STARS OVERHEAD BEGAN TO DISAPPEAR, swallowed by some enormous darkness interposing itself from above and behind the shuttle. Sharply pointed at its most forward position, broadening behind, the flood of blackness advanced, blotting out more and more of the unblinking starfield, until darkness was all there was to see.

Then, all across the length and breadth of the ominous shape, lights came on—blue and white running lights, tiny red hatch and security lights, sudden glows from within transparisteel viewports, one large rectangular whiteness limned by atmosphere shields. The lights showed the vast triangle to be the underside of an Imperial Star Destroyer, painted black, forbidding a moment ago, now comparatively cheerful in its proper running configuration. It was the *Gilad Pellaeon*, newly arrived from the Imperial Remnant, and its officers clearly knew how to put on a show.

Jaina Solo, sitting with the others in the dimly lit passenger compartment of the government VIP shuttle, watched the entire display through the overhead transparisteel canopy and laughed out loud.

The Bothan in the sumptuously padded chair next to hers gave her a curious look. His mottled red and tan fur twitched, either from suppressed irritation or embarrassment at Jaina's outburst. "What do you find so amusing?"

"Oh, both the obviousness of it and the skill with which it was performed. It's so very, *You used to think of us as dark and scary, but now we're just your stylish allies.*" Jaina lowered her voice so that her next comment would not carry to the passengers in the seats behind. "The press will love it. That image will play on the holonews broadcasts constantly. Mark my words."

"Was that little show a Jagged Fel detail?"

Jaina tilted her head, considering. "I don't know. He could have come up with it, but he usually doesn't spend his time planning displays or events. When he does, though, they're usually pretty ... effective."

The shuttle rose toward the *Gilad Pellaeon's* main landing bay. In moments, it was through the square atmosphere barrier shield and drifting sideways to land on the deck nearby. The landing place was clearly marked—hundreds of beings, most wearing gray Imperial uniforms or the distinctive white armor of the Imperial stormtrooper, waited in the bay, and the one circular spot where none stood was just the right size for the Galactic Alliance shuttle.

The passengers rose as the shuttle settled into place. The Bothan smoothed his tunic, a cheerful blue decorated with a golden sliver pattern suggesting claws. "Time to go to work. You won't let me get killed, will you?"

Jaina let her eyes widen. "Is that what I was supposed to be doing here?" she asked in droll tones. "I should have brought my lightsaber."

The Bothan offered a long-suffering sigh and turned toward the exit.

They descended the shuttle's boarding ramp. With no duties required of her other than to keep alert and be the Jedi face at this preliminary meeting, Jaina was able to stand back and observe. She was struck with the unreality of it all. The niece and daughter of three of the most famous enemies of the Empire during the First Galactic Civil War of a few decades earlier, she was now witness to events that might bring the Galactic Empire—or Imperial Remnant, as it was called everywhere outside its own borders—into the Galactic Alliance on a lasting basis.

And at the center of the plan was the man, flanked by Imperial officers, who now approached the Bothan. Slightly under average size, though towering well above Jaina's diminutive height, he was dark-haired, with a trim beard and mustache that gave him a rakish look, and was handsome in a way that became more pronounced when he glowered. A scar on his forehead ran up into his hairline and seemed to continue as a lock of white hair from that point. He wore expensive but subdued black civilian garments, neck-to-toe, that would be inconspicuous anywhere on Coruscant but stood out in sharp relief to the gray and white uniforms, white armor, and colorful Alliance clothes surrounding him.

He had one moment to glance at Jaina. The look probably appeared neutral to onlookers, but for her it carried just a twinkle of humor, a touch of exasperation that the two of them had to put up with all these delays. Then an Alliance functionary, notable for his blandness, made introductions: "Imperial Head of State the most honorable Jagged Fel, may I present Senator Tiurrig Drey'lye of Bothawui, head of the Senate Unification Preparations Committee."

Jagged Fel took the Senator's hand. "I'm pleased to be working with you."

"And delighted to meet *you*. Chief of State Daala sends her compliments and looks forward to meeting you when you make planetfall."

Jag nodded. "And now, I believe, protocol insists that we open a bottle or a dozen of wine and make some preliminary discussion of security, introduction protocols, and so on."

"Fortunately about the wine, and regrettably about everything else, you are correct."

At the end of two full standard hours—Jaina knew from regular, surreptitious consultations of her chrono—Jag was able to convince the Senator and his retinue to accept a tour of the *Gilad Pellaeon*. He was also able to request a private consultation with the sole representative of the Jedi Order present. Moments later, the gray-walled conference room was empty of everyone but Jag and Jaina.

Jag glanced toward the door. "Security seal, access limited to Jagged Fel and Jedi Jaina Solo, voice identification, activate." The door hissed in response as it sealed. Then Jag returned his attention to Jaina.

She let an expression of anger and accusation cross her face. "You're not fooling anyone, Fel. You're planning for an Imperial invasion of Alliance space."

Jag nodded. "I've been planning it for quite a while. Come here."

She moved to him, settled into his lap, and was suddenly but not unexpectedly caught in his embrace. They kissed urgently, hungrily.

Finally Jaina drew back and smiled at him. "This isn't going to be a routine part of your consultations with every Jedi."

"Uh, no. That would cause some trouble here and at home. But I actually *do* have business with the Jedi that does not involve the Galactic Alliance, at least not initially."

"What sort of business?"

"Whether or not the Galactic Empire joins with the Galactic Alliance, I think there

ought to be an official Jedi presence in the Empire. A second Temple, a branch, an offshoot, whatever. Providing advice and insight to the Head of State.”

“And protection?”

He shrugged. “Less of an issue. I’m doing all right. Two years in this position and not dead yet.”

“Emperor Palpatine went nearly twenty-five years.”

“I guess that makes him my hero.”

Jaina snorted. “Don’t even say that in jest ... Jag, if the Remnant doesn’t join the Alliance, I’m not sure the Jedi *can* have a presence without Alliance approval.”

“The Order still keeps its training facility for youngsters in Hapan space. And the Hapans haven’t rejoined.”

“You sound annoyed. The Hapans still giving you trouble?”

“Let’s not talk about *that*.”

“Besides, moving the school back to Alliance space is just a matter of time, logistics, and finances; there’s no question that it will happen. On the other hand, it’s very likely that the government would withhold approval for a Jedi branch in the Remnant, just out of spite, if the Remnant doesn’t join.”

“Well, there’s such a thing as an *unofficial* presence. And there’s such a thing as rival schools, schismatic branches, and places for former Jedi to go when they can’t be at the Temple.”

Jaina smiled again, but now there was suspicion in her expression. “You just want to have this so *I’ll* be assigned to come to the Remnant and set it up.”

“That’s a motive, but not the only one. Remember, to the Moffs and to a lot of the Imperial population, the Jedi have been bogeymen since Palpatine died. At the very least, I don’t want them to be inappropriately afraid of the woman I’m in love with.”

Jaina was silent for a moment. “Have we talked enough politics?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

Yawning, hair tousled, clad in a blue dressing robe, Valin Horn knew that he did not look anything like an experienced Jedi Knight. He looked like an unshaven, unkempt bachelor, which he also was. But here, in these rented quarters, there would be only family to see him—at least until he had breakfast, shaved, and dressed.

The Horns did not live here, of course. His mother, Mirax, was the anchor for the immediate family. Manager of a variety of interlinked businesses—trading, interplanetary finances, gambling and recreation, and, if rumors were true, still a little smuggling here and there—she maintained her home and business address on Corellia. Corran, her husband and Valin's father, was a Jedi Master, much of his life spent on missions away from the family, but his true home was where his heart resided, wherever Mirax lived. Valin and his sister, Jysella, also Jedi, lived wherever their missions sent them, and also counted Mirax as the center of the family.

Now Mirax had rented temporary quarters on Coruscant so the family could collect on one of its rare occasions, this time for the Unification Summit, where she and Corran would separately give depositions on the relationships among the Confederation states, the Imperial Remnant, and the Galactic Alliance as they related to trade and Jedi activities. Mirax had insisted that Valin and Jysella leave their Temple quarters and stay with their parents while these events were taking place, and few forces in the galaxy could stand before her decision—Luke Skywalker certainly knew better than to try.

Moving from the refresher toward the kitchen and dining nook, Valin brushed a lock of brown hair out of his eyes and grinned. Much as he might put up a public show of protest—the independent young man who did not need parents to direct his actions or tell him where to sleep—he hardly minded. It was good to see family. And both Corran and Mirax were better cooks than the ones at the Jedi Temple.

There was no sound of conversation from the kitchen, but there was some clattering of pans, so at least one of his parents must still be on hand. As he stepped from the hallway into the dining nook, Valin saw that it was his mother, her back to him as she worked at the stove. He pulled a chair from the table and sat. “Good morning.”

“A joke, so early?” Mirax did not turn to face him, but her tone was cheerful. “No morning is good. I come light-years from Corellia to be with my family, and what happens? I have to keep Jedi hours to see them. Don't you know that I'm an executive? And a lazy one?”

“I forgot.” Valin took a deep breath, sampling the smells of breakfast. His mother was making hotcakes Corellian-style, nerf sausage links on the side, and caf was brewing. For a moment, Valin was transported back to his childhood, to the family breakfasts that had been somewhat more common before the Yuuzhan Vong came, before Valin and Jysella had started down the Jedi path. “Where are Dad and Sella?”

“Your father is out getting some back-door information from other Jedi Masters for his deposition.” Mirax pulled a plate from a cabinet and began sliding hotcakes and links onto it. “Your sister left early and wouldn't say what she was doing, which I assume either means it's Jedi business I can't know about or that she's seeing some man she doesn't *want* me to know about.”

“Or both.”

“Or both.” Mirax turned and moved over to put the plate down before him. She set utensils beside it.

The plate was heaped high with food, and Valin recoiled from it in mock horror. “Stang, Mom, you're feeding your son, not a squadron of Gamorreans.” Then he

caught sight of his mother's face and he was suddenly no longer in a joking mood.

This wasn't his mother.

Oh, the woman had Mirax's features. She had the round face that admirers had called "cute" far more often than "beautiful," much to Mirax's chagrin. She had Mirax's generous, curving lips that smiled so readily and expressively, and Mirax's bright, lively brown eyes. She had Mirax's hair, a glossy black with flecks of gray, worn shoulder-length to fit readily under a pilot's helmet, even though she piloted far less often these days. She was Mirax to every freckle and dimple.

But she was not Mirax.

The woman, whoever she was, caught sight of Valin's confusion. "Something wrong?"

"Uh, no." Stunned, Valin looked down at his plate.

He had to think—logically, correctly, and *fast*. He might be in grave danger right now, though the Force currently gave him no indication of imminent attack. The true Mirax, wherever she was, might be in serious trouble or worse. Valin tried in vain to slow his heart rate and speed up his thinking processes.

Fact: Mirax had been here but had been replaced by an imposter. Presumably the real Mirax was gone; Valin could not sense anyone but himself and the imposter in the immediate vicinity. The imposter had remained behind for some reason that had to relate to Valin, Jysella, or Corran. It couldn't have been to capture Valin, as she could have done that with drugs or other methods while he slept, so the food was probably not drugged.

Under Not-Mirax's concerned gaze, he took a tentative bite of sausage and turned a reassuring smile he didn't feel toward her.

Fact: Creating an imposter this perfect must have taken a fortune in money, an incredible amount of research, and a volunteer willing to let her features be permanently carved into the likeness of another's. Or perhaps this was a clone, raised and trained for the purpose of simulating Mirax. Or maybe she was a droid, one of the very expensive, very rare human replica droids. Or maybe a shape-shifter. Whichever, the simulation was nearly perfect. Valin hadn't recognized the deception until ...

Until *what*? What had tipped him off? He took another bite, not registering the sausage's taste or temperature, and maintained the face-hurting smile as he tried to recall the detail that had alerted him that this wasn't his mother.

He couldn't figure it out. It was just an instant realization, too fleeting to remember, too overwhelming to reject.

Would Corran be able to see through the deception? Would Jysella? Surely, they had to be able to. But what if they couldn't? Valin would accuse this woman and be thought insane.

Were Corran and Jysella even still at liberty? Still *alive*? At this moment, the Not-Mirax's colleagues could be spiriting the two of them away with the true Mirax. Or Corran and Jysella could be lying, bleeding, at the bottom of an access shaft, their lives draining away.

Valin couldn't think straight. The situation was too overwhelming, the mystery too deep, and the only person here who knew the answers was the one who wore the face of his mother.

He stood, sending his chair clattering backward, and fixed the false Mirax with a hard look. "Just a moment." He dashed to his room.

His lightsaber was still where he'd left it, on the nightstand beside his bed. He snatched it up and gave it a near-instantaneous examination. Battery power was still optimal; there was no sign that it had been tampered with.

He returned to the dining room with the weapon in his hand. Not-Mirax, clearly confused and beginning to look a little alarmed, stood by the stove, staring at him.

Valin ignited the lightsaber, its *snap-hiss* of activation startlingly loud, and held the point of the gleaming energy blade against the food on his plate. Hotcakes shriveled and blackened from contact with the weapon's plasma. Valin gave Not-Mirax an approving nod. "Flesh does the same thing under the same conditions, you know."

"Valin, what's *wrong*?"

"You may address me as Jedi Horn. You don't have the right to use my personal name." Valin swung the lightsaber around in a practice form, allowing the blade to come within a few centimeters of the glow rod fixture overhead, the wall, the dining table, and the woman with his mother's face. "You probably know from your research that the Jedi don't worry much about amputations."

Not-Mirax shrank back away from him, both hands on the stove edge behind her. "What?"

"We know that a severed limb can readily be replaced by a prosthetic that looks identical to the real thing. Prosthetics offer sensation and do everything flesh can. They're ideal substitutes in every way, except for requiring maintenance. So we don't feel too badly when we have to cut the arm or leg off a very bad person. But I assure you, that very bad person remembers the pain forever."

"Valin, I'm going to call your father now." Not-Mirax sidled toward the blue bantha-hide carrybag she had left on a side table.

Valin positioned the tip of his lightsaber directly beneath her chin. At the distance of half a centimeter, its containing force field kept her from feeling any heat from the blade, but a slight twitch on Valin's part could maim or kill her instantly. She froze.

"No, you're not. You know what you're going to do instead?"

Not-Mirax's voice wavered. "What?"

"You're going to *tell me what you've done with my mother!*" The last several words emerged as a bellow, driven by fear and anger. Valin knew that he looked as angry as he sounded; he could feel blood reddening his face, could even see redness begin to suffuse everything in his vision.

"Boy, put the blade down." Those were not the woman's words. They came from behind. Valin spun, bringing his blade up into a defensive position.

In the doorway stood a man, middle-aged, clean-shaven, his hair graying from brown. He was of below-average height, his eyes a startling green. He wore the brown robes of a Jedi. His hands were on his belt, his own lightsaber still dangling from it.

He was Valin's father, Jedi Master Corran Horn. But he wasn't, any more than the woman behind Valin was Mirax Horn.

Valin felt a wave of despair wash over him. *Both* parents replaced. Odds were growing that the real Corran and Mirax were already dead.

Yet Valin's voice was soft when he spoke. "They may have made you a virtual double for my father. But they can't have given you his expertise with the lightsaber."

"You don't want to do what you're thinking about, son."

"When I cut you in half, that's all the proof anyone will ever need that you're not the real Corran Horn."

Valin lunged.

The STAR WARS Novels Timeline

OLD REPUBLIC 5000–33 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Lost Tribe of the Sith*

Precipice

Skyborn

Paragon

Savior

Purgatory

Sentinel

3650 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

The Old Republic: Deceived

Lost Tribe of the Sith*

Pantheon

Secrets

Red Harvest

The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance

1032 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Knight Errant

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction

Darth Bane: Rule of Two

Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil

RISE OF THE EMPIRE 33–0 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

Cloak of Deception

Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

STAR WARS: EPISODE I: The Phantom Menace

Rogue Planet

Outbound Flight

The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

STAR WARS: EPISODE II: Attack of the Clones

22–19 YEARS BEFORE *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

The Clone Wars

The Clone Wars: Wild Space

The Clone Wars: No Prisoners

Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege
Republic Commando
 Hard Contact
 Triple Zero
 True Colors
 Order 66
Shatterpoint
The Cestus Deception
The Hive*
MedStar I: Battle Surgeons
MedStar II: Jedi Healer
Jedi Trial
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous
Labyrinth of Evil

19 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*

STAR WARS: EPISODE III: Revenge of the Sith

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Imperial Commando 501st

Coruscant Nights

 Jedi Twilight

 Street of Shadows

 Patterns of Force

The Han Solo Trilogy

 The Paradise Snare

 The Hutt Gambit

 Rebel Dawn

The Adventures of Lando Calrissian

The Force Unleashed

The Han Solo Adventures

Death Troopers

The Force Unleashed II

REBELLION 0–5 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Death Star

Shadow Games

0

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV: A NEW HOPE

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Tales from the Empire

Tales from the New Republic

Allegiance

Choices of One

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*
STAR WARS: EPISODE V: *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*
Tales of the Bounty Hunters
Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*
STAR WARS: EPISODE VI: *RETURN OF THE JEDI*
Tales from Jabba's Palace
The Bounty Hunter Wars
 The Mandalorian Armor
 Slave Ship
 Hard Merchandise
The Truce at Bakura
Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor

NEW REPUBLIC 5–25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

X-Wing
 Rogue Squadron
 Wedge's Gamble
 The Krytos Trap
 The Bacta War
 Wraith Squadron
 Iron Fist
 Solo Command
The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost
The Thrawn Trilogy
 Heir to the Empire
 Dark Force Rising
 The Last Command
X-Wing: Isard's Revenge
The Jedi Academy Trilogy
 Jedi Search
 Dark Apprentice
 Champions of the Force
I, Jedi
Children of the Jedi
Darksaber
Planet of Twilight
X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar
The Crystal Star
The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy
 Before the Storm
 Shield of Lies
 Tyrant's Test
The New Rebellion
The Corellian Trilogy
 Ambush at Corellia
 Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint
The Hand of Thrawn Duology

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future
Fool's Bargain*
Survivor's Quest

NEW JEDI ORDER 25–40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Boba Fett: A Practical Man*

The New Jedi Order

Vector Prime

Dark Tide I: Onslaught

Dark Tide II: Ruin

Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial

Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse

Balance Point

Recovery*

Edge of Victory I: Conquest

Edge of Victory II: Rebirth

Star by Star

Dark Journey

Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream

Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand

Traitor

Destiny's Way

Ylesia*

Force Heretic I: Remnant

Force Heretic II: Refugee

Force Heretic III: Reunion

The Final Prophecy

The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Dark Nest Trilogy

The Joiner King

The Unseen Queen

The Swarm War

LEGACY 40 + YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Legacy of the Force

Betrayal

Bloodlines

Tempest

Exile

Sacrifice

Inferno

Fury

Revelation

Invincible

Crosscurrent

Riptide

Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Fate of the Jedi

Outcast

Omen

Abyss

Backlash

Allies

Vortex

Conviction

Ascension

Apocalypse

*An eBook novella